

### Chapter 341 Arrangements

In the past couple of days, Ves fulfilled as many duties as possible. He discussed and approved the expansion plans with the officers of the company.

In particular, he approved the procurement of two brand new production lines for the LMC's new manufacturing complex. Due to a lack of cash on hand, the company would have to go into debt to the tune of 4 billion credits, but this was easily bearable since the Blackbeak models still sold like hotcakes for now.

He also conducted his interview with Mercenary Central in his office. The interview was a lot more relaxed than the one he had with the Rimward Star herald. Ves mainly spoke some platitudes and constantly highlighted the benefits of the Blackbeak model. He tried his best not to trip over himself by uttering a gaffe.

Overall, the interview with Mercenary Central had largely been forgettable. The LMC and its partners only received a minor bump in orders for the Blackbeak models. Ves mainly treated the public exposure as a way to plant some seeds in the subscribers of the publication.

Not every mercenary was short on mechs at the moment. Once the war heated up, their losses would begin to pile up. Ves hoped that they remembered his words and took a closer look at the Blackbeak.

"It's difficult to raise more interest in my product at this time. The hype has died down."

The Blackbeak ceased to be a news item among the the public. The market had moved on to shinier toys that came out in the last month or so. Still, many professionals knew about the Blackbeak and what it could offer to its owners. Even if its sales started to slide, it hadn't cratered to single digits as of yet.

After the interview, Ves got in touch with Melkor who travelled to Bentheim and instructed him to manage the Avatars of Myth by himself for the time being.

"Are you having any trouble recruiting promising pilots?"

Melkor grimaced over the projection. "To be honest, I've come way too late. The Mech Corps and the mercenary corps have snapped up almost every competent mech pilot available for hire in the preceding months. The only ones who are left are failures or carry a black mark on their record."

"Take your time, then. I don't mind if you have to wait a few months to gather seven or eight good mech pilots. This first batch of mech pilots will form the core of the Avatars of Myths. It's vitally important to know that we can rely on them to lead our future recruits."

"I understand, Ves. I'm actually reaching out beyond the Republic at this point. There are still some promising foreign mech pilots who expressed some interest in working for a mech designer."

Mech pilots generally liked to work with successful mech designers. Unlike mercenaries, they didn't have to go around from job to job but instead mostly spent their time in one place. They only had to go out for a few errands once every few years.

Unlike company forces, mech pilots directly in the employ of a mech designer often received favored treatment with regards to the mechs they got to pilot. Mech designers always lavished their most loyal protectors with their best works.

Ves was no exception in this regard. In time, he planned to pair the entire roster of the Avatars of Mechs with his own designs.

"Have you also made a selection of mechs?"

"Not yet. I'm eyeing a handful of models, but It's hard for me to decide which ones I should settle on. It will help if you can tell me how you plan to use the Avatars of Myth."

"The Avatars will first and foremost act as my bodyguards. They should have the ability to act as my defenders and repel any Tom, Dick and Harry that wants to take a shot at me with their mechs. The second priority is to be able to go on an expedition in hazardous environments far away from civilization. Think of the Glowing Planet or Groening IV. The mech pilots of the Avatars of Myth should be mentally prepared to go on these kinds of arduous trips."

Melkor sighed. "I can easy gather up some mech pilots who are eager to take up guard duty, but the latter is a lot more difficult to deal with. Not a lot of talented mech pilots are eager to gamble with their lives. Everyone knows of the danger that's inherent with every expedition into the unknown."

"I'll make it worth their while. You can offer as much salary and benefits as you want, though I hope you don't stray too far from the predominant market rates."

Everyone had a price. As long as they threw enough money around, Ves and Melkor would surely be able to attract some poor but greedy mech pilots with some abilities.

Ves hung up on Melkor after discussing some further details. The issue of the Avatars of Myth could not be rushed. It was not as if he had any need for them at this time, especially since he was about to embark on a solo trip to the middle of nowhere.

Alongside his duties, Lucky often followed him as he went back and forth. Ever since he reached level 3, Lucky tested out his new abilities with the curiosity of a child.

The most drastic enhancement had to be his gravity manipulation. With it, Lucky finally gained the ability to fly.

In the first days, Lucky often raced around in the air like a dolphin in the water. Sadly, his control hadn't caught up with his enthusiasm and he often flattened his body against a wall or some furniture.

Everyone laughed when that happened, including Ves. Lucky hadn't been hurt, of course. Even if he flew fast enough to hurt a living cat, his Rorach's Bone-based body could endure a lot of punishment.

"Lucky, stop flying around so much! You're damaging the furniture!"

"Meow!"

His cat ignored him and continued to swim in the air. While Lucky started to get a hang of controlling his movements by manipulating his gravity, Ves arranged some plans the LMC should follow in his absence.

"I'm not certain we're ready to move into the new manufacturing complex. It's still a month away from finishing." Jake responded after he received the latest plan.

"We can't delay our move for long." Ves replied. "The war has already broke out. In the previous Bright-Vesia Wars, the Vesians always sent out raiding fleets to strike at vulnerable Republican infrastructure. For better or worse, we're part of the Republic's war industry and a valid target."

The thought of an attack had always lingered at the backs of everyone's mind, but no one truly considered the Vesians would spare a fleet to attack their meager workshop.

Jake couldn't believe the Vesians would resort to such a thing. "We only have a single production line after you dismantled the old printer. There are many

other mech manufacturers that contribute a lot more to the defense of the Republic."

"All those companies with four or more production lines aren't stupid. They already bolstered their company forces in order to deter any raids. The Vesians won't send out too many mechs in their raiding fleets, so they have to pick their targets with care. Our old workshop is a soft target in their eyes. Even if we don't amount to much for now, it might be different in the future."

"I see. They might want to divert some resources at us in order to strangle us in our cradle."

The mech industry regarded the LMC as a promising mech manufacturer. As long as Ves didn't screw up and continued to publish quality design, its rise was already a given.

Naturally, the Vesians wouldn't like that.

"I'll put my support behind the move. I'll make certain the manufacturing complex will be up and running within two months."

Time would be tight, and mishaps were bound to happen, but Ves truly prioritized everyone's safety. The sooner they moved into their fortified complex, the safer they would all be.

Ves didn't have to arrange many major instructions after that. Besides the development of new designs, the company ran by itself, exactly the way he liked it. He only spent some time to issue some reminders to the board of directors. They better not be making any major decisions without his presence.

"Getting Vaun on board was bad enough. I won't accept any more dissention, even from my grandfather."

Although he resented his grandfather for supporting that move, Ves didn't have the guts to call him out on it. He avoided his grandfather and seemingly forgot about him during his brief stay on Cloudy Curtain.

On the day of his departure, he shuttled over to the spaceport and boarded the Barracuda with only Lucky as his companion. As he reached the hatch, he turned around and beheld his planet.

"It's too soon for me to leave again, but I don't have any choice. I need to do this mission alone."

Once he stowed away his luggage, he entered the bridge. Captain Silvestra already instructed the Barracuda to lift off into space. The corvette hardly rumbled as it escaped Cloudy Curtain's gravity well, which was a testament to her well-trained crew.

"I see you are all making your recent training to good use."

"Mr. Larkinson, welcome aboard." Silvestra nodded to him from the captain's seat. "You haven't told us yet where you want us to fly. Where do you want to go?"

"Set a course for NCVEFG-3438 for now. I'll feed you the next jump once we reach the next star system."

NCVEFG-3438 was actually a lifeless red dwarf with hardly any planet to note. The galaxy contained countless of red dwarfs, and most of them held nothing of value at all. They only formed a somewhat convenient transition point for ships looking to evade the public eye.

"Aye aye, boss. I'll set our next destination to NCVEFG-3438. Our estimated arrival time is two days."

Ves had already planned his route over four different stops, each of which consisted of four abandoned or empty star systems. There were too many of

these star systems to count, even in a desolate place like the Komodo Star Sector.

Although he knew that the Republic and other forces hid some observation equipment in these star systems, as long as his crew put their vaunted skills to use, they could easily obfuscate their readings and mislead them into thinking they had transitioned towards another star system. Any trained crew could pull off such a trick.

Once Ves became satisfied with Silvestra's arrangement, he returned to his stateroom and sat behind his desk. He pulled up a secure data pad that contained a book he recently ordered from the Clifford Society.

With several hundreds of merits to his account, he figured that he should brush up on his knowledge on laser weapons while he travelled to his final destination. Ves planned to acquire some Sub-Skills from the System as well, but he wouldn't be able to enlighten himself with the personal perspective of past experts.

The books on his reading list consisted of textbooks and musings of various experts that had once made contributions in the field of directed energy weapons. Reading their thoughts and understanding their paradigms helped him digest the knowledge he learned from the forbidden research data on gamma lasers he unearthed a long time ago.

"Hopefully I can upgrade my Skills or gain a new Sub-Skill at the end."

Of all the things he enjoyed about his career, he loved to learn new things. His ability to design a mech had come a long way since the start of his career.

Before, he had to rely on designing virtual mechs and variants of existing designs.

Now, he became accustomed to designing his own original mechs. Even though he only had the Blackbeak to his name, he maintained full confidence that he could repeat the magic of his first original design.

"My rifleman mech should be even better than the Blackbeak, now that I'm about to work on upgrading my Physics to Senior-level. I'll have to design a groundbreaking machine in order to attract a lot of sales."

Though the challenge seemed daunting, Ves never lost his fighting spirit. He believed he could succeed.

### Chapter 342 Citadel Havensworth

The Havensworth Star System was one of the most important and strategic locations in the wars between the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom. Situated right at the border between the two warring states, the fortified star system played an essential role in curtailing the advances of the aggressive Vesians.

People once said that the Bright Republic couldn't exist without this star system.

"The Vesia Kingdom is larger and more prosperous than the Bright Republic. The only reasons why we haven't lost to them is because their nobles are constantly stabbing each other's backs and because Havensworth is tying down a large portion of the Mech Legion."

Most star systems of note consisted of a number of stars and some orbiting planets along with a couple of asteroid belts or clouds. What made Havensworth extraordinarily hard to invade was due to its two peculiar properties.

As a binary star system, it consisted of two stars, a bigger one and a smaller one. The bigger one was a giant, which made it easier to travel to from a longer distance. Besides radiating a lot of electromagnetic radiation, it also

ejected a fair amount of stellar wind, which made the entire Havensworth System a hazardous place for ships.

Any invaders attempting to conquer the system's sole inhabited planet had to endure the grinding stellar winds that constantly emerged from the giant star. The strength of the stellar wind varied from time to time. Even a capital ship would buckle in front of the strongest winds.

The giant's larger mass also widened the star system's gravitic field, which meant that a hostile fleet emerged out of FTL from a much larger distance. This provided the defenders with ample time to respond to the new presence. It also made it harder for the losers of a conflict to run away into FTL.

If that wasn't bad enough, the smaller star emitted a strange disruptive field that blocked all means of communicating through a quantum entanglement node. This effectively meant that anyone that went inside would be isolated from the rest of the galaxy. No form of communication could reach any ship or base in the disruptive star's influence.

Such stars were rare, but the Bright Republic happened to have occupied it before the Vesians could get their claws on it. Ever since then, the Bright Republic always managed to hang on to the Havensworth Star System no matter how much they'd been pressed.

The Mech Corps turned the largest rocky planet in the system into a veritable fortification. Havensworth II or Citadel Havensworth formed the nucleus of the Republic's defense against the Vesians. Although the citadel planet lacked any signs of life, the Mech Corps comprehensively transformed its underground terrain into a deep and exquisite set of fortifications.

It was virtually impregnable from above. The only way to crack this shell was to utilize taboo weapons or to invade the tunnels with a crushing amount of mechs.

An illustrious member of the Larkinsons commanded over the largest and most important bases underneath the surface. With Colonel Ark Larkinson holding the fort, the mech pilots of the Mech Corps would never give in to despair.

"So long as the Magnificent Knight still draws breath inside these tunnels, the Republic shall never fall!"

The Vesian Mech Legion had never succeeded in taking over the citadel planet, but they often tried again with each war. They faced a lot of difficulties due to the lack of instant communication and the stellar winds that pounded their ships.

Only heavily armored ships would be able to linger in the star system, and only up to a month or so. This forced the Vesians to divert much of their precious capital ships to the Havensworth System, leaving their lightly armored transports and logistic ships behind.

The Mech Corps on the other hand built up an enormous stockpile of supplies in their underground bases. They could comfortably hold the citadel planet for a decade, tying down their adversaries without any help from the rest of the Republic.

Right now, the Vesians pressed the Havensworth Star System with two divisions worth of fleet carriers and mechs. They destroyed the space stations that orbited the various planets in the system before proceeding to surround the citadel planet in a wide orbit.

They stopped short at invading the dreaded fortified planet. Even though its exterior looked as barren as any lifeless rocky planet, an extensive reinforced tunnel network ran many kilometers underneath.

They stretched for thousands of kilometers in every direction, branching out and converging back together in a random pattern meant to obfuscate even

their own designers. Not a single Brighter possessed a complete map of the tunnels.

Furthermore, the Bright Republic collapsed and rebuilt the entire tunnel network after every war. This meant that the Vesians had to send out scouting parties to map out the upper levels of the tunnel at the onset of each new war.

Such an operation took several years to complete. The Vesians had already become familiar with this time consuming task, so they spared no time in starting their mapping operations.

Dozens of mech squads emerged from the fleet carriers and quickly dove to the surface of the rocky planet. They had to enter the planet's magnetic field as fast as possible in order to shield their frames against the stellar winds that occasionally penetrated closer to orbit.

The aerial mechs did not require any assistance in descending onto the planet, though they needed help getting back up into orbit, which the fleet carriers would send out after they completed their mission.

Once the squads of aerial mechs reached the surface, they fanned out towards the underground entrances the ships in orbit had already spotted.

One squad consisted of mechs from the Grand Chasers regiment. As a squad of light mechs, they excelled in scouting duties such as this. They swiftly flew inside the tunnels and mapped out the interior in rapid tempo.

The Mech Corps quickly sent out their own response. A squad of mechs from the 6th Stellar Lancers Regiment emerged from an underground hatch. A mix of twelve light and medium aerial mechs flew out to block the Vesians from going any deeper.

The two squads encountered each other a couple of minutes later. The initial clash went poorly for the Grand Chasers as they struggled to dodge the incoming Lancers.

At least half of the squad from the Stellar Lancers consisted of spearman mechs. Their mechs had all been designed to pierce through anything in their way.

The dreadful opening clash heavily damaged two hapless light mechs from the Grand Chasers. The subsequent battle turned into a brief and intensive dogfight until the Vesian interlopers finally managed to turn the other way around, dragging their damaged mechs with them as they fled like rats.

The Stellar Lancers tried to catch up to their prey but it was to no avail.

"Tch. They're too fast. The Grand Cowards are only good at running away."

Skirmishes like these happened every day. Due to the abundance of tunnels in Havensworth II, some of the scouts penetrated deeper into the tunnels before they met any opposition. It couldn't be helped as the Mech Corps only had so many mechs to spread around.

The scouts emerged from the tunnels a handful at a time. They converged on the heavily armored transports that had been sent out from the fleet carriers in orbit. The mechs filed into the transports which brought them back to their ships.

This pattern repeated again and again as the Vesians sent out squad after squad. The operation only stopped when the fleet carriers had to escape the brutal stellar winds that wore down its exterior armor.

Fleets from both sides occasionally dropped in, but they never stuck around for long.

Compared to the tame battles that took place on Citadel Havensworth, the other border systems encountered a lot more grief.

Cities burned while civilians fled to underground shelters as the Mech Legion overran the token defenses put up by the poor and underdeveloped border systems.

Frankly, the star systems situated at the border of the two states had changed their allegiance so often that the inhabitants possessed no intrinsic loyalty to either powers.

Someone's parents might have grown up under Vesian rule while they themselves grew up under Brighter rule.

Everyone born in these border systems had become used to shifting their loyalties at the drop of a hat. Once the fighting died down, the garrisons shamelessly pledged to serve the Vesians while the citizens welcomed the occupying infantry forces as liberators.

"Down with the Republic!"

"Long live the Vesian King!"

Even though the Mech Legion easily occupied these border systems, they held no strategic value at all. They offered very little wealth and except for a paltry amount of taxes. Instead, they acted as a drag on the Vesia Kingdom. In order to hold on to the systems and push up the frontlines, they had to allocate a significant amount of mechs to hold these worthless territories.

The Vesians didn't dare to be too negligent in occupying these systems, because the Mech Corps sometimes used them as outposts in their counterattacks in past wars.

These were actually just the opening moves in the war. Both sides knew that the war would drag on for at least three to four years. In order to smooth the way for the subsequent years, the Republic and the Kingdom both held back the bulk of their strength. A pitched battle so early in the war benefited neither

side, especially since they recently slugged it out at the tail end of the Glowing Planet campaign.

Across the entire Republic, the drums of war began to beat its citizens into action. Several potentates that pursued civilian lives had been called up by the Mech Corps. They enjoyed a lot of privileges in times of peace, but in exchange they signed up as reservists. Every citizen who could pilot a mech had to be ready to fight for their state.

A handful of reservists protested their reassignment during each and every war. They had become inured to the indolent life as civilians. They became scared at the prospect of piloting mechs in the middle of an active war zone.

"Don't take me away! I can do better at home!"

"Unhand me, you uncouth barbarians! I am a potentate! It's illegal to touch me!"

"My skills are atrophied! I'm hardly fit to pilot a mech these days!" A portly man squealed.

An armored infantryman bashed the potentate with the butt of his rifle. "Oh shut up. You spoiled potentates are always hollering the same things. Man up for once in your life and accept your duty!"

"What duty?! I never wanted to be a soldier! I'll faint at the sight of blood!"

The fat man received another thunk on his head.

"Hehe, we don't care. By the time you've gone through your remedial training, you'll get used to seeing buckets of blood. Take this lard ball away!"

Alongside potentates, the Republic also drafted plenty of norms. Every war nowadays centered around mechs, but there was still a place for infantry in order to manage occupied or liberated territories. Mechs also needed a lot of

servicing from support personnel, and turrets and vehicles had to be manned as well.

Right now, the level of mobilization had only reached an early state. Even as the Republic shifted its society into war footing, it had to do so with care in order to prevent an overall collapse of its economy.

Only a handful of sectors thrived during a war. Mech manufacturers benefited most as long as long as their designs had merit. Their suppliers also did good business so long they could operate their mines without interruption.

The Vesians knew this very well, and sent out a handful of deep strike fleets to harass their adversary's infrastructure.

As a center of Republican industry and commerce, Bentheim often received the brunt of these raids.

But that was a story for another day, for the Barracuda had finally reached her destination after more than a week of travel.

#### Chapter 343 Joe

Ves looked at his Status page with pride. After more than a week of studying a couple of books from the Clifford Society, he managed to acquire a new Sub-Skill on his own.

[Rapid-Fire Laser Weapon Operation I]

This Sub-Skill enhanced his understanding of laser rifles and was much more specific and comprehensive than Directed Energy Weapon Optimization II. While the latter only allowed him to optimize an existing energy weapon design, his new Sub-Skill enabled him to design a laser weapon from scratch.

Specifically, Rapid-Fire Laser Weapon Operation I focused on delivering quick pulses of laser beams. A series of pulses as opposed to a single, long-burn beam. This mode of firing came with its own challenges, but it enabled laser rifles to use up less energy and slow down the buildup of heat.

The books he read also inured him to the perspectives of the authors, both of whom reached the Senior-level in their lifetimes. One author advocated that laser rifles should be as efficient as possible, while the other author preferred to unleash as much power as possible with each pulse.

Both of them approached laser rifles from different directions, allowing Ves to make up his own mind about the topic.

"Laser rifles have a bad reputation for being unable to penetrate the shell of a heavily armored mech. That will certainly change in the next generation, but for now it's too hard for laser rifles to punch through the armor of a striker or a knight."

In his opinion, laser weapons excelled at outputting a steady amount of damage. Heat concerns limited their ability to burst down an opponent, but they generally lasted longer than ballistic and kinetic rifles. Both used up bulky ammunition, and mechs only possessed a limited amount of carrying capacity.

"There are some who believe that laser rifles will replace kinetic rifles entirely."

Many wide-eyed theorists prophesied the phasing out of melee weapons in favor of ranged weapons. They also stated that the relatively low-tech ballistic rifles had no more place in this day and age because their fundamental principles hadn't really changed since their initial emergence on pre-space Earth.

"Too bad they're wildly wrong."

Even as laser weapons continued to grow in power and efficiency, those who specialized in armoring mechs had also tried to keep up. They blended various exotics together into unique formulas that underpinned the rise of energy resistant armor. Mechs that specialized solely against countering laser weapons performed extraordinarily well against a barrage of lasers.

Sadly for the armorers, most energy resistant armor proved to be highly vulnerable to physical damage. A couple of cheap, low-tech explosive shells would easily be able to tear down such a fragile shell.

Low tech weapons still had a place in the Age of Mechs. From the lowest rung of third-class frontline mechs, to the highest reaches of cutting-edge mechs, mechs of all shapes and sizes found a use for barbarically primitive weapons.

Besides, these weapons had progressed with the times as well. Even though they hadn't experienced a lot of changes in their fundamental workings, the development of smaller technologies and the use of exotics enabled these arms to compete favorably against laser weapons.

"Laser weapons are only a single means to damage a target." Ves scratched his messy black hair. "Even while I'm focusing on them, I shouldn't buy into the viewpoint that they are higher tech than ballistic weapons."

Besides working to acquire Rapid-Fire Laser Weapon Operation I, Ves also sneakily reread the research notes on Graser Rifles he stole from the underground base a long time ago. With his enhanced Intelligence and Journeyman-level Physics Skills, he easily grasped the points that eluded him the previous times he read the disparate collection of notes and data.

It helped that the researchers who produced the documents started from roughly the same foundation as him. While they possessed a much deeper foundation in this field, Ves still managed to keep up with the theories mentioned in their analyses.

The textbooks he perused earlier proved to be the key that allowed him to fully decipher the contents of the research notes. At a certain point, everything clicked in his mind, allowing him to fully follow the trains of thoughts of the researchers.

"It's pretty admirable what they've accomplished in a couple of years. They started out with a conventional laser rifle and enhanced it step by step until it became capable of firing gamma lasers."

The amount of engineering challenges they faced required a cross-disciplinary approach to solve. Ves benefited hugely from reading about the development of specialized components such as high-capacity energy cells and extended heat rods.

"Heatsinks shaped like rods fit a long narrow object such as a rifle better than a thick rectangular block."

The researchers opted to make the heat rods disposable. This meant that mechs could eject them from their rifles once they became too hot and replace them with a fresh one which they carried on their backs.

Personally, Ves understood the necessity, but he wasn't a fan of this solution. "Their gamma laser rifle design needs to be fed with both energy packs and heat rods. It's going to be an awful mess trying to cycle both of them during a pitched battle."

The actual rifle was more impractical than practical. While it functioned well enough in space, it hardly lived up to the likes of actual taboo weapons such as nuclear bombs and biological plagues.

"Well, the researchers did work from scratch, and with the technology level of a third-rate state. I'm sure that researchers from a first-rate superstate can develop something much more destructive."

Whatever the case, the System demanded that Ves design and fabricate an actual working graser rifle. He guessed that the System didn't care too much about its actual performance so long as it worked.

That still didn't mean that Ves planned to skimp on the design. He suspected that the lessons he learned from developing his graser rifle could be put to use when he designed his second original mech.

So with a renewed focus on laser weapons, Ves fully digested the research notes until the System deemed his studies sufficient and updated his Status page.

[Gamma Laser Weapons I]

"Finally." He sighed and leaned back in his chair. "I was hoping I could make it before my ship makes it to my destination."

He turned off his Privacy Shield and removed his comm before placing it on his desk. Ten seconds later, the comm regained its full charge, allowing Ves to place it back on his wrist.

After freshening himself up, he stepped out of his stateroom and headed for the bridge. Once he entered it, he looked at the projected screens and saw that the Barracuda still had two hours left before it reached the lifeless planet in this generic abandoned star system.

"Welcome back to the bridge, Mr. Larkinson."

Ves tipped his finger on his chin. "Has there been any activity in NCJOEV-646?"

"Nothing has pinged our sensors as of yet. That doesn't preclude any stealth drones or ships that are masking their emissions, but I'm fairly certain this system is as quiet as a mouse."

Nothing ever happened in NCJOEV-646, or the Joe as everyone called it. Joe consisted of another run-of-the-mill red dwarf. What was special about Joe was that the star system contained no planets at all.

Instead, it featured a rather extensive asteroid cloud, although it was largely flat. This meant that ships positioned above and below the 'disk' would have no trouble navigating in the vicinity of Joe.

Currently, Ves ordered the Barracuda to head in-system through the sparser portion of the asteroid cloud. While the loose-flying asteroids posed a significant risk to the corvette, the sections she flew through wasn't so dense that she wouldn't be able to escape any sticky situations.

Ves had decided upon Joe as his final destination because the asteroids contained a lot of junk metallic contents. This would scramble any sensors trying to pick out ships. While a larger transport or carrier would still stand out somewhat, a slim and tiny corvette was virtually indistinguishable from an equivalent-sized asteroid as long as it didn't generate too much heat.

Joe would have been a perfect smuggler's hideout if it hadn't been situated close to the center of the Bright Republic. It neighbored several major star systems with substantial military patrols.

There was very little opportunity for smugglers and pirates to do business out of Joe in these circumstances. Perhaps only desperate criminals escaping the law from those major star systems took advantage of the asteroid cloud.

Much like Ves in this case. He did intend to break one of the most fundamental taboos of human society, after all.

"Have you fixed the location of my end stop?" Ves asked.

"As far as we are aware of, the asteroid you're looking for is still orbiting close to the red dwarf. It hasn't been bumped into for thousands of years."

He nodded. A lot of collisions happened in the asteroid field, but it happened less in certain places. Surveyors paid to scan desolate star systems had partially mapped out the asteroid field, though they didn't even try to register

each and every single floating rock. A couple of collisions would make their overly detailed map out of date anyway.

Instead, the surveyors focused on mapping out the largest asteroids. They eventually recorded over a hundred-thousand asteroids with cavities, valleys or holes large enough to hide a corvette.

Ves picked out an asteroid that carried the abbreviated name of Joe-2364343 as a place to work on his gamma laser rifle in peace. The large asteroid just happened to offer a deep cave from which Ves could spend his next weeks out of sight of any peeping sensors directed at the asteroid field.

Even if someone placed some sensors inside the cave, he trusted that Lucky would be able to sniff them out beforehand.

Almost two hours later, they arrived at the asteroid in question. It loomed over the Barracuda like a cruiser. Its dark, rocky exterior appeared ominous in the dim light of Joe's red dwarf star.

Nothing had changed since the last survey. Joe-2364343 hadn't suffered any impacts that pushed it off-course. The cave also looked intact enough for Ves to inhabit.

"Everything looks okay." He nodded as he finished studying the sensor readings. "Let's get closer."

The Barracuda maneuvered close to the cave in reverse. This allowed the corvette to orient her rear cargo bay hatch with the entrance of the cave. Once they came as close as safely possible, the hatch opened up, revealing the cargo bay that had been depressurized beforehand.

Several sensor bots emerged from the cargo bay. They swiftly entered the cave and scanned it for any unpleasant surprises left behind by someone else.

Following that, a series of hauler bots began to lift the cargo containers from the bay and into the cave. Once they finished with the smaller containers, they returned and carefully brought out the old second-hand printer that Ves had been prepared to write off after this impromptu expedition.

"Careful now, bots!" Ves called out even though the bots weren't smart enough to understand his words.

He floated out of the open cargo bay in a hazard suit. Lucky floated alongside him. During the previous week of travel, his pet finally managed to get the hang of flying. The white cat nimbly drifted up and down and back and forth.

"Go on ahead and track down any hidden recorders or spy drones!"

Lucky didn't slack off and began to dart into the depths of the cave. Ves believed that Lucky's recent advancement had improved his intelligence and detection capabilities.

"He should be alright." Ves muttered to himself as he floated above the asteroid.

The asteroid was large enough to dwarf the corvette, but exerted practically no gravity at all. Ves had already prepared some anti-gravity platforms beforehand for him to do his work, but it would be difficult for him to last more than a month. He only brought enough fuel to feed the power generator for a month.

"Let's hope nothing happens in Joe while I work."

#### Chapter 344 War Crime

While the war between the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom flared up, a much bigger battle ensued out of the eye of the public.

After the passing of the seventy day deadline, the Glowing Planet and its immediate vicinity turned into a forbidden zone in the truest sense. This time,

the danger didn't come from the unnatural phenomena radiating from the planet.

This time, the true rulers of the Komodo Star Sector had arrived.

"Bright Republic? Vesia Kingdom? Never heard of them."

Two enormous armadas spanning more than fifty-thousand ships and more than a million mechs collided against each other. Their so-called skirmishes easily dwarfed the most pitched battles the Vesians and Brighters had ever fought.

On the side of the Friday Coalition, every major partner chipped in their forces, leading to an eclectic mix of ship and mech models. Of all the partners, the Gauge Dynasty and the Konsu Clan fought the best and thereby claimed the biggest share of the proceeds of the strip mining operations.

As for the Hexadric Hegemony, the matriarchal society imposed a complete uniformity of its military forces. Their fleets looked like clones as they used the exact same ship and mech models throughout their entire navy and mech forces.

Both approaches had their good and bad points.

"The Six are One."

For the Hegemony, imposing the same designs for all of their war materiel vastly simplified their supply chains. Production, maintenance and training activities reached an unprecedented level of efficiency.

The Hegemony also centralized their design work to an unprecedented high level. A committee of Master Mech Designers inspected and approved every single new design regardless if they incorporated it into the military or released it to the civilian sector. If even one Master disapproved of a design, then it had no future in the Hegemony.

"Rebirth through Adversity."

As for the Coalition, their abundance of designs fostered a culture of innovation. Their researchers often trumped their counterparts from the Hegemony due to their hectic pace of development and production.

Sometimes, they published designs that flopped. However, with each failure, the developers and their competitors learned something new. Their next products definitely surpassed their previous ones.

The two second-rate states held diverging views on how humanity and society should be ruled. Their relations had always been poor, and the fact that they each occupied vital resource-rich regions in the center of the Komodo Star Sector added fuel to the flame.

The Glowing Planet merely provided an early window in how the two second-rate states would struggle over supremacy in one of the most remote star sectors in the galaxy.

Both of their armadas slip into smaller fleets that maneuvered around the Glowing Planet in complex patterns meant to preserve their mobility. Large-scale mining ships passing by from orbit deployed special apparatuses underneath the surface of the Glowing Planet. These devices promptly blew up or cracked apart a humongous chunk of land into space.

These remnants would subsequently be captured by other mining ships that had orbited into pre-calculated positions.

Chunk by chunk, the two states visibly chipped away at the Glowing Planet without any mercy. As a non-lifebearing planet, the Glowing Planet was not protected by the treaties imposed by the MTA and CFA.

No one cared whether it survived at the end of the clash. Both sides pursued the maximum amount of benefit in the least amount of time, hence they

employed the most destructive methods of strip mining the hapless rogue planet.

It could only blame itself for bumping into a trade convoy when it passed through the Komodo Star Sector.

Even though the Bright Republic and the other third-rate states wanted to peek at the battles raging around the Glowing Planet, the two overbearing combatants had deployed a significant amount of machines that blocked and obfuscated any attempts to observe the surrounding area.

Any ship that strayed within a light-year of the Glowing Planet would quickly be pursued and destroyed without any appeal.

Far away from the Glowing Planet but well inside the borders of the Republic, Ves floated at the entrance of the cave in his hazard suit. He looked out at the dim, red-tinted asteroids that streaked in front of his current abode.

The lonesome sight inspired him. He had not been truly alone for many years now. Hardly any human could be found within the Joe Star System.

Once the Barracuda dropped off Ves and his supplies, she flew towards another major asteroid well out of range.

For the time being, Ves wouldn't be able to communicate with anyone, but neither would anyone be able to locate him and observe his work.

Which was exactly the way he liked it at this time.

"This damn mission. Sure, it's a C-grade mission under normal circumstances, but why the hell does it want to saddle me with a war crime?"

The seriousness in which every human treated taboo weapons nowadays had reached a hysterical level. Just the mere hint of it could spark an immediate panic in the entire star sector.

Forget about the MTA and CFA, even the Bright Republic would deploy all of its forces to squash those who flouted this rule.

In the first day, Ves did not immediately embark on his design work. Instead, he installed and inspected all of the gear he brought. He spent the most time on partially disassembling his second-hand 3D printer for any hidden spying or recording components.

With the help of Lucky, they sniffed out over two-dozen different bugs.

"This is a lot worse than I thought."

He had no doubt that most of the bugs came from his hired help. Sanyal-Ablin never promised to respect his privacy when he contracted them to provide security.

Privacy? Did that word even exist in the Age of Mechs?

Ves ultimately had to delay his timetable and spend a vigorous amount of time catching each and every microscoping spy drone.

He thanked his lucky stars that he redeemed his Privacy Shield from the System early on when he hardly attracted any attention. The device had quietly shielded him from electronic observation during his most crucial moments when he interacted with the System.

Now that the LMC grew into a multi-billion credit behemoth, Ves attracted much more attention than before. He couldn't even go to the toilet or take a shower without being spied on by a dozen different parties.

Every public figure had to deal with such an intense level of scrutiny, including Ves.

Once he finished combing over every device including his hazard suit, he finally became comfortable enough to embark on his actual purpose for traveling to the middle of nowhere.

"Let's start designing."

According to the mission, Ves would pass its requirements if he successfully came up with a practical graser rifle design. Implicit in the description was that he wouldn't be able to pass the mission if he plagiarized the existing designs from the research notes that set him on this path.

"The spirit of the mission appears to be driving me towards pushing my Physics Skill and related Sub-Skills to the limit."

Ves had never designed a laser rifle before. His only practical experience with laser weapons was when he repaired them during the Glowing Planet campaign and when he modified an existing model for the 2-star Old Soul virtual mech.

Anyone could tweak an existing design. At the simplest level, a modification could be as simple as replacing one material for another or to shift a couple of components by several millimeters.

By working from the safety of a proven design, the person who performed the modification could be as sloppy as he wanted as long as his work remained within certain boundaries.

In contrast, designing a weapon from scratch entailed a lot more work. Ves had to take into account a thousand different aspects when he made his design choices.

"It's actually a lot like designing a mech."

Designing a weapon fell a bit out of his expertise, but Ves managed to stay on track by borrowing from his experiences with designing his first original mech.

"First, I'll have to set a vision for my graser rifle."

Distasteful as it appeared, Ves had to force himself into imagining the use of his weapon. He envisioned a frigid duel in space. Two spaceborn rifleman mechs circled around each other as they traded potshots at each other.

One rifleman mech utilized a conventional laser rifle adapted to space. It fired infrared beams from a bulky rifle that featured a much larger heatsink. Due to the lack of gravity in space, the rifleman mech wasn't overly hindered by its weapon's increased mass.

In comparison to the moderately bulky laser rifle, the gamma laser weapon wielded by its opponent resembled a miniature cannon. It featured a much bigger weapon frame in order to accommodate its jumbo-sized battery, heat rod and internal mechanisms.

"With my skills, I won't be able to design a rifle that's as compact as the one developed by the research team." Ves quietly judged.

The graser rifle's firing rate was a lot lower than a conventional laser rifle, but each energetic beam traced by a small amount of waves from the visible spectrum. Each time it hit the enemy mech, its armor hardly buckled, but an extremely large amount of energy got absorbed or passed through the layers of armor.

Whenever the gamma rays passed through an electronic system, they got fried. Once it reached the cockpit and passed through the pilot, the outcome of the battle became clear.

The stricken and irradiated mech turned into a lifeless entity after getting hit by only five high-powered gamma laser beams.

Ves pulled his mind back from his construction vision. "A graser rifle kills the pilot before the machine."

As long as the weapon pumped enough power into the beam, it could pass through any amount of armor and irradiate the enemy pilot.

"What a horrible way to die."

He knew very well how the human body fared against the might of a graser beam. Dr. Kawasaki who originally compiled the research notes had cruelly experimented on live subjects to satisfy his sadistic power trip.

The thought of following in Dr. Kawasaki's footsteps put Ves in a difficult position.

Should he even proceed with this mission? What was the System's intention by setting him on this potentially ruinous course of action?

"Laws and rules of convention constrain a mech designer. By purposefully incentivizing me to break a taboo, the System seems to be telling me that I shouldn't take the rules for granted."

The System set itself above the rules that governed human society from the onset of the Age of Mechs.

Would the System push him to breaking another rule in the future?

Ves mentally shrank from the idea. Even though the System acted deviously, Ves had no choice but to play along its tune in order to harvest some benefits out of it. For better or worse, he became an accomplice of the inscrutable System and its unknown goals.

"As long as I get to reach the pinnacle of mech design, I'll commit any number of war crimes if I have to."

Ves had already stepped aboard the ship. If he stepped out now before it had reached its destination, he'd end up choking to death in interstellar space.

He turned his attention back to his design. Now that he formed a vision of his weapon, he began to draft a design for his laser rifle.

Unlike with mechs, Ves did not employ his Triple Division or any other technique related to X-Factor.

"A graser weapon doesn't deserve the X-Factor."

Even he had his limits. If the System set him on the path to committing a war crime, he wouldn't do so with a smile.

Ves treated his design like a chore to be performed as soon as possible. He decided not to take any excessive care with his design choices and instead stick to a basic, workhorse design with plenty of tolerances for failure.

"The bigger the weapon, the more leeway I'll carve out for myself."

Ves spent two days on his draft design. After that, he spent five more days refining its schematic into a precise and functional product. In theory.

In the meantime, the Joe System was as quiet as a mouse. Not a single ship transitioned out of FTL during this time. Just the red dwarf, the asteroids and the Barracuda kept Ves company in the unremarkable star system.

The only excitement happened when Lucky decided to pass his boredom by boring straight towards the center of the asteroid. Once there, the gem cat encountered a peculiar rectangular substance.

Lucky curiously pawed what looked like a crystal window.

#### Chapter 345 Decahedron

While Lucky prodded a clearly artificial object buried inside the asteroid, Ves began to test his initial graser rifle design in a simulation.

The simulated weapon immediately blew up in the hands of the mech.

"What?!"

Ves was sure he nailed the design. It should have spat out at least an anemic gamma laser beam. To blow up in the face of the simulated mech was out of the realm of possibilities.

Thinking that the environment may have played a role, Ves repeated the simulation in different environments. He shifted from space to terrestrial environments such as forests or ice-capped terrain.

The graser rifle continued to explode without fail.

"I thought I was so close!"

He underestimated the technical challenges involved with turning a concept of a weapon into reality. He derived the bulk of his work from the research notes. Evidently, he made a mistake at some point. Perhaps he derived too much from the research notes and failed to adjust them to his own design.

Ves performed the simulations again and called up some data from the moment the simulated mech pulled the trigger.

Everything went fine in the start. It only started to go wrong when an abundance of power ran through the mechanisms responsible for generating the actual graser beam.

Certain components couldn't handle the load and melted down, leading to a variety of awful effects that cascaded into a dreadful explosion.

"Damnit, this mechanism isn't strong enough."

For some reason, Dr. Kawasaki made it work. The research notes abundantly laid out the detailed design process for the internal mechanisms. When Ves followed the instructions to design his own version of the mechanism, it failed to withstand the load.

"Let's see what happens if I dial down the power."

The graser rifle kept exploding until it reached a threshold where the mechanism failed to perform at all. Gamma ray lasers demanded a lot of power. Without a sufficient amount of power, the mechanisms failed to work at all.

"This is a problem." Ves said as he pressed his fists against his waist.

The constant isolation was getting to him somewhat. If not for the bumbling presence of Lucky, he might have turned erratic.

More than the lack of people, his inability to access the galactic net and stay connected to the rest of the galaxy irked him a lot.

"I have no idea how the war is progressing."

Historically, the Vesians cautiously probed the Republic's defenses. Their most destructive actions consisted of raids against Republican infrastructure and industry. The Vesians loved to take out soft targets early in the war before they could be of help to the Brighters.

He didn't worry too much about the LMC. It wasn't a high priority target and his workers should have already started moving his assets to the underground manufacturing complex. Sanyal-Ablin's substantial presence there was sufficient to deter any casual raid.

"I should focus on completing my own tasks."

He spent the next hours trying to puzzle out the exact failure point. He uncovered a number components that performed well below their theoretical parameters.

He'd been far too sloppy too sloppy in his design work.

"Rather than say I've been sloppy, it's more fitting to say that the graser rifle can't tolerate any failures."

Ves deliberately designed a bigger rifle to make it easier for him to design a workable heat rod and battery, but the design choice introduced its own complexities. Certain components couldn't be scaled at all. Other parts performed strangely when Ves had increased their size.

It took several more days for him to solve these problems. He ran over each component one by one and tweaked them until their parameters fell within the expected range. To be honest, he had to resort to a lot of kludging and improvisation in order to get the mechanisms to work with each other.

Ves had never designed a conventional laser rifle from scratch. Trying to design its big brother in a single go turned out to be highly unrealistic.

As the days passed by, Ves began to get a hang of trying to get his laser rifle to work. It started out with a maze of problems, but by tackling the most obvious issues one at a time, he steadily reduced the unworkable nature of his homegrown design.

He put his weapon to the test yet again in another basic simulation in space.

The weapon fired a graser beam without problem this time. The only issue was that the beam's power fell well below his intended output. Too much energy had been wasted in the conversion process.

"I'm getting close."

In truth, he could have already started to fabricate the current design, but his perfectionist streak started to take over. His interest in getting his graser rifle to work had engulfed his mind. He unconsciously poured his passion into improving his design.

In the meantime, Lucky through the asteroid and encountered more rectangular crystals. In its eyes, they looked a lot like windows. However, they couldn't be broken or melted at all. No matter how many times he scratched them with his energy claws or chewed them with his mineral-breaking teeth, the panes of crystals remained as whole as ever.

Lucky meowed angrily at the latest crystal window barring his tunnel. Couldn't a gem cat burrow through an asteroid in peace?

No sound actually escaped from his maw, as the vacuum environment couldn't convey any sound.

It was the thought that counted.

Nevertheless, the crystals annoying him to such an extent that he began to dig them out of the asteroid and carry them out of his tunnels. With a modest application of his gravity manipulation, he sent out the indestructible crystals out into space.

One by one, they escaped their resting place and flew out into the asteroid cloud.

In time, many of those crystals bumped into other asteroids. They burrowed rather deep in their new abodes. After thousands or millions of years, they would continue to rest inside the asteroids without incident.

Strangely enough, that didn't happen. The crystal windows thrown out onto other asteroid began to grow active. They shone with light as some unknown alien systems embedded into the transparent crystals wearily turned active.

Eons had passed since they last became active.

As the asteroids brought them tumbling away from each other, the crystals finally unleashed a portion of their might. They connected to each other with bright, intangible strings of energy.

The asteroids they resided on suddenly stopped their senseless tumbling. Their trajectory came to a halt as these heavy objects had been fixed into a forceful stop.

Then they began to move.

The energy strings forcefully rearranged the positioning of the asteroids until they formed a

decahedron relative to their original resting place.

This place just so happened to be the asteroid that held the cave where Ves holed up at the moment. Both Ves and Lucky ignorantly continued their usual routines.

The outline of the decahedron started to turn solid as the spaces between the lines turned opaque. Once they finally turned into a solid pane of white, everything inside had been captured.

The energy panes cut right through the other asteroids as if an atom blade had passed through them. Many chunks became loose and spun away. Some even bumped into the asteroid in the middle.

Ves hardly noticed a tremble as his hazard suit held him aloft.

Once the activity died down, the decahedron began to glow even brighter. It also started to pulse.

The pulse began slow, but sped up over time. This time, Lucky noticed something amiss and stepped outside the tunnel he had dug. Once he saw that the asteroid had been surrounded by a lot of panes of light, he immediately meowed in alarm and flew towards Ves.

The cat bumped straight into Ves and pawed at his hazard suit.

"Ouch! Lucky, I told you not to bump into me again!"

Ves had been knocked out of his highly focused state. He almost finished his final design!

Lucky kept acting like a crazy cat. Ves took note of his pet's behavior and figured out that something was wrong.

"Show me the way."

Lucky led him out of the cave, upon which Ves stumbled upon the amazing sight in front.

"What is this?!"

Everywhere his eyes could reach, what looked like solidified light had trapped his asteroid in a cage. He grew scared at the sight of the unknown.

"Did you do this, Lucky?!"

His cat acted like this had nothing to do with him. Lucky merely stared his big eyes up at Ves, hoping that he could come up with a fix.

"I don't know what's going on myself. This must be some kind of ancient alien contraption."

The ten-sided object surrounded the asteroid from all sides like an inescapable prison. Ves contemplated summoning his Amastendira to shoot at the panes, but ultimately held off on this decision. Who knew what might happen if he tripped some sort of failsafe.

"The main characters of those adventure dramas trigger alien traps all the time. I never expected something like this would happen to me as well! What awful luck!"

Ves picked up a rock that had been embedded into the surface of the asteroid and threw it at the nearest pane.

According to Newton's First Law, an object in motion stayed in motion. Deep in space and away from any major gravity wells like stars and planets, the chunk of rock continued to sail forth in a virtually straight line.

Once it reached the pane, it abruptly flashed and disintegrated out of existence.

Ves gulped in his hazard suit. "Alright, so it's not a good idea to go through this wall of light."

He threw another rock at one of the corners which formed the anchors of his light prison. He encountered the same result.

With an increasing amount of alarm, Ves tried to test out a number of ways in which he could open a gap in the decahedron. Nothing worked. All of it failed.

Desperate times called for desperate measures. After half an hour of procrastinating, he decided to take a risk. He summoned the Amastendira from his inventory and dialed it up to the highest setting.

"I don't know what's going to happen, but I hope it will work."

A bright beam flashed out from the barrel of the mastercrafted laser pistol. The thick beam carved a hole straight through the pane of light.

Everything changed at that moment.

The decahedron grew unstable while a wild storm of light happened just outside the hole. Ves grew dizzy staring at the nonsensical sight. It felt a lot like looking straight out of a window of a ship travelling in FTL.

He closed his eyes and tried to suppress his headache.

Once he opened his eyes. He emerged in an entirely different location.

Gone was the asteroid. Gone was the decahedron. The cave behind him disappeared as well, along with the 3D printer and supplies he had brought.

Only Lucky remained. His cat had hung onto his shoulder in fear. His paws tightly gripped his hazard suit to the point of scratching its coating.

"Where... am I?" He asked as he looked around his completely different surroundings.

Ves somehow emerged on a Terran jungle planet. The environment mimicked the Terran standard, and when his hazard suit tested the air, it found it breathable, though there were traces of poisonous substances in the air.

A human might be able to survive for a week. As for Ves, his hybrid human physique should comfortably be able to breathe the air, not that he intended to do so for the time being.

Gravity also started to act upon him. It hadn't acted on his body immediately, but rather eased him to it, as if he didn't entirely exist on this strange location.

Ves had the sense that the decahedron only partially transpositioned him to this location.

"Did I interrupt some kind of spatial shift?"

His spontaneous and reckless decision to shoot the decahedron with a high-powered laser beam had disrupted what he suspected to be a teleportation process.

Ves could have easily turned his body into noodles or fractured it in tiny pieces across multiple light-years. That he came through this disaster with his body somewhat intact was a miracle.

Still, that didn't mean he was out of the woods just yet. He still had to figure out a way to get back to his asteroid.

"Now what?"

### Chapter 346 Alien

The decahedron brought him to an unknown planet without warning. If that wasn't enough, his intervention had screwed up the transfer process, stranding Ves in a strange state.

His body, his gear and Lucky only partially existed on this jungle planet. He could breathe the air and stand on the ground, but when he tried to touch a tree his hands went right through as if he was a ghost.

"Am I turning into my mother?"

Ves quickly shook his head. This was no time for jokes. He performed some more experiments and found out that besides breathing the air, he could only interact with the environment in a couple of ways.

The most important observation was that he couldn't go through anything thicker than the leg of a mech. Anything bigger became an obstacle to him. On the other hand, it also allowed him to interact with the object.

"Lucky, come try to scratch this big old tree."

The jungle was overgrown and ancient. It possessed a peculiar desolate aura that pinged his sixth sense. The trees had lived through countless standard years. Some of them even reached a thickness comparable to an office building.

When Lucky floated over and raked the bark of the tree with his energy claws, the tree had definitely become scratched.

Something changed at that moment.

Their surroundings whooshed as the giant tree trembled. The other trees began to sway as well.

The entire forest became agitated as if Lucky had affronted them all!

Lightning suddenly flashed between the trees. Thick bright lightning bolts interweaved the entire forest as if it had been turned into a lightning storm on the scale of a gas giant!

Just when Ves thought he would be fried to a crisp, the lightning bolts all harmlessly passed through his body and gear. Not even Lucky suffered a single burn.

The lightning storm only persisted for a couple of seconds before subsiding. Even though Ves got off unscathed, he still felt all of his hairs turn stiff.

He could have died just then!

The entire incident could have killed him if he hadn't entered a semi-corporeal state!

"These aren't regular trees. This isn't a terraformed planet."

Ves became aware that he fell into the trap of relying on his preconceived notions. Just because an alien tree looked like a tree didn't mean it behaved the exact same way as a Terran-standard tree.

Humanity came across many cases of convergent evolution in the galaxy. Countless of habitable planets that revolved around yellow suns grew trees that grew green leaves in order to make the most out of photosynthesis.

That didn't mean that all of these trees evolved into passive, unmoving lifeforms.

Having learnt his lesson, Ves towed Lucky away towards a random direction. He wanted to get away from this frightening forest as fast as possible. Who knew if they retained a means to affect a semi-corporeal entity such as him in his current state.

Ves and Lucky ran for half an hour. The forest seemed endless, and the canopy barely allowed him to glimpse the pale blue sky above. Throughout his passage, he never came across a single native insect or wildlife.

Had the trees fried them all? Had the indigenous life forms evolved to instinctively avoid this forest?

The all-encompassing presence of the trees put a fair amount of mental pressure on Ves. These trees hadn't held back their might when one of them suffered a scratch. Even now, his mental senses perceived a subtle waveband in the air that carried a vague threatening flavor.

No outsiders allowed!

Thus, even if he didn't see an end to the forest, Ves still ran as if his life depended on it. Fortunately, his partially alien physique provided him with a boundless amount of energy. Although his internal energy cycle still hadn't fully recovered since meeting his mother, it still provided more than enough of a push to sustain his run.

"Even my Jutland organ is acting strangely!"

The organ responsible for most of the changes in his body became more active all of a sudden ever since he ended up on this unknown planet. Ves had the sense that it leeches some of the ambient energy emitted by the trees.

Ves did not like where this was going. His body already carried an excess amount of internal energy.

Thus, he continued to run in hopes of exiting the scary forest. In order to make sure he ran in a straight line, he utilized his hazard suit's navigational functions. Although it temporarily hadn't been able to make sense of the planet's magnetic field, it still featured other settings that could keep track of his route.

Even without his hazard suit, his comm offered similar functionality, so he wasn't helpless from the start.

After another half hour of running, Ves finally reached the edge of the forest. The trees abruptly grew less dense until they stopped growing entirely. Once he finally escaped the forest he stopped and caught his breath. Even with a strengthened body, he hadn't conditioned it to sustain an hour-long run.

After he straightened up, he beheld the dreary brown landscape before him. A wide valley stretched before him. Unlike the forest behind him, the valley was completely barren of any growths. Neither plants or animals came into his

view. While that relieved him somewhat, it also puzzled him. Why would the forest abruptly stop its growth in this direction?

He swept his gaze over at the hills and mountains and caught a single location that shone and sparkled with a brilliant luster. The location sat on top of a low hill a fair distance away from his current location.

To Ves, it looked like a sign of civilization.

"Finally! A potential clue!"

Ves had always kept his eye out for any signs that could explain his impromptu teleportation. The sudden appearance of the decahedron and its strange light show came too abruptly for him to draw any clues on what had happened.

Whatever the case, the decahedron definitely fulfilled some sort of purpose. It wouldn't dump him on a virgin planet without purpose. The act of transferring him from the Joe System to a completely different one with a yellow sun and a habitable planet must have used an enormous amount of power.

The technologies that made this possible also made it clear that this was not a casual event!

Rumors swirled around that the first-rate superstates developed a means of teleporting something from one star system to another. Whether these rumors spoke the truth or not, most people considered such technologies to be out of reach of the general public.

Thus, Ves held a definite interest in the alien device. What was its origins? What kind of aliens constructed it? What was its purpose? Why was it buried in a desolate red dwarf system in the galactic rim?

"Why did it trigger now?"

He racked his brains over the last question and couldn't figure out an answer. He pushed his questions to the back of his mind and jogged towards the site that glistened in the alien sun.

He controlled his pace since it would definitely take a few hours to reach his destination. All the while, he kept observing his surroundings for any further clues.

"This valley is completely barren. There's not a hint of life in this place."

Now that he distanced himself from the forest, Ves sensed that the ominous waves he caught before had faded away. Nothing else brushed against his sixth sense, so he slowly let down his guard.

"There shouldn't be anything I should be worried about here."

Just as he took another step forward, the ground underneath broke apart as a massive mouth ripped upwards. Some kind of two-clawed worm emerged from below and tried to snap his body in a single bite!

Fortunately, the worm was just small enough to pass through his body, but the hole the worm had dug caused Ves to lose his footing. He started to slide into the bottomless well until he hastily engaged his hazard suit's antigrav function.

After the clawed organism failed to bite him, it crashed back down into the earth, turning around for another go. The soil beneath the worm's passage buckled as the alien creature forcefully dug close to the surface.

"You won't get me this time!"

Ves hovered higher and retrieved a white block made out of exquisite alloys and composites. It quickly unfolded in the majestic gold-cruled Amastendiria.

He dialed the power setting to a moderate setting and pointed the muzzle in the direction of the disturbance in the soil.

"Come on then! Take a bite out of me if you dare!"

Even Lucky stood ready on his shoulder. The cat had been caught off-guard with the first strike, which shamed him to no end. If Ves couldn't take down the worm, then Lucky would definitely follow suit.

The clawed worm emerged from below yet again. As far as tactics went, the worm primarily appeared to be driven by instinct.

Some things always stayed the same. Worm-like creatures never exhibited any notable level of intelligence in the galaxy.

A thick golden laser beam seared the worm straight into its maw. Its internal organs received so much damage that it instantly broke the beast. With an agonizing wail, the worm collapsed on the soil, having reached just short of engulfing Ves.

The ugly worm's appearance repelling him on a primordial level, so Ves quickly shot it again until he became sure of its demise.

After that, he spent a couple of minutes inspecting the dead creature. As much as he wanted to leave the sordid corpse behind, Ves still had to find some clues on what went on in this place.

A brief inspection of the corpse revealed that the worm wasn't as long as he thought. It was roughly as long as a mech. It featured no obvious organs besides the claws. It didn't even possess any eyes as far as Ves had seen.

Underneath the cutting burns left over from the Amastendira, Ves spotted a number of unknown but disgusting-looking organs. He didn't dare to come any closer.

He might have been able to figure out a wealth of information if he was an exobiologist. Sadly, his expertise only extended to mechs and machines. He remained as clueless as a bystander when it came to alien life.

"This is one scary creature, though. It's likely not the only one that's around here."

Ves looked back at the barren valley and imagined the clawed worms lying dormant underneath the surface. The thought instantly sent a chill down his back.

He checked the power, water and oxygen reserves of his hazard suit. "I only have two days left until my oxygen reserves run out. Water will last a little longer, but my suit is able to recycle my waste."

If people had to leave their hazard suits every time they needed to go to the toilet, then they wouldn't be so widely used.

Ves tried not to think he'd be drinking water filtered from his own bodily waste in a couple of days and focused on his power reserves.

"My battery will only last for a week."

After that, his suit would run out of power. The motors that eased his motions would lock up and the waste management systems would stop supplying him with recycled air and water.

Ves did not relish the thought of devolving into a savage that lived off the land.

"I have to find a way out as soon as possible!"

He left the corpse behind and continued to run towards his destination. Along the way, he encountered several more ambushes. The clawed worms really didn't like it when someone stepped over their heads.

Ves solved each and every one of them with a single laser beam. The creatures possessed no resistance against this type of energy damage. Added to the fact that the Amastendira's battery constantly regained its charge on its own, Ves showed no scruples against the primitive beasts.

He finally reached the site atop the hill after four hours of running. The marathon took its toll on his body and he stopped again to catch his breath.

Once he looked up, he observed a clearly artificial sight, something he had never encountered since he ended up on this planet. He came across a city of crystal.

### Chapter 347 Crystal City

The ground abruptly turned into an opaque white crystal that stretched from one end of the city to the other. It formed the base for the majestic spiralling structures that stretched out into the sky for at least two-hundred stories.

A large number of statues had been placed between the spiral structures. Most of them consisted of strange geometric shapes that resembles runes of some sort. They shone in a soft white light but otherwise showed nothing special at all.

The city would have looked impressive if not for its size. The tallest spiral structures merely reached a head above his own heights. The streets were so narrow and small that Ves would have to walk sideways if he wanted to squeeze between the spiral structures.

"It's like I'm the giant now."

He found the shift in perspective to be odd and amusing. Ves remembered some of the dramas he saw as a kid. Back then, giant aliens often showed up to threaten human cities.

The diminutive size of the ruins filled him with a bit confidence. It was hard to fear a dead alien species the size of his finger.

After shrugging off his idle thoughts, he resumed his attempt to find a way back home. The alien city would certainly contain a clue.

Ves tried to decipher the meaning of the runes but came up nothing. Not even his comm had been able to match the runes to its database of languages.

Humanity had never encountered these ruins before. The aliens who build this place must have lived a long time ago.

The galaxy was old. Aliens rose and fell since the birth of the galaxy many billions of years ago. It was a different time then. The universe was smaller and space seethed with excitement. Countless stars came into being and clumped together in vast agglomeration of galaxies centered around the largest black holes known to man.

Many theorists believed that the vast majority of exotics emerged from this time of cosmic turmoil. The first aliens who emerged from their planets and gained the ability to traverse the stars took advantage of the abundant amount of exotics within their reach.

Many aliens also evolved with the help of certain exotics, granting their races an unprecedented level of power in exchange for becoming dependent on their supply.

These early forbearers of the galaxy erected mighty might that lasted for eons and changed many planets and even stars to suit their own species. Monuments of their works could be found everywhere in the galactic center.

Much of it had already been discovered and dismantled by humanity. As a race in ascendancy, it wouldn't do to leave the relics of other races alone. What if humans started worshipping the aliens?

Thus, true alien relics became something of a rarity in the galaxy. The galactic center had been scoured long ago while the purging of the galactic heartland still continued to this day.

The only place where people could reliably bump into undiscovered alien relics was the galactic rim. It was too vast, sparse and barren for humanity to control in its entirety.

The Komodo Star Sector happened to be one of humanity's most remote star sectors. Lucky prospectors constantly uncovered a handful of alien remains every standard year.

Most of them consisted of lifeless ruins, but a couple of remnants still possessed enough power to work.

Sometimes they even killed their discoverers. Ves almost shared the same fate.

Thus, even if the miniature city looked dead and frozen, Ves still kept his vigilance.

"Even if they're small, their technology surpasses humanity's in many areas."

Ves experimentally fired a spiral with his Amastendira. He dialed down the power setting to the lowest one possible.

The laser beam hit a spiral, and instead of destroying it, the spiral absorbed the entire beam!

"What?!"

The spiral structure glowed and pulsed until it released a strange white energy in every direction. Its spiral shape allowed it to hit every other spiral in sight without fail. Those spirals started to glow as well until they pulsed out their own lights, affecting other structures that hadn't been touched by the light before.

The entire city appeared to have been built like an array!

The strange phenomenon continued until each spiral structure glowed with white. They pulsed and pulsed, but the excessive splitting had dimmed the overall luminosity of the glow. There was too little energy to go around. After half a minute of flickering, the glows died down, and the miniature city fell back to sleep.

Ves almost had a scare when the entire city lit up. Something wonderful or awful might have happened and he hadn't been prepared at all. Who knew why the aliens turned their own abodes into energy emitters?

He didn't understand their purpose. He lacked too much context to make sense of the city. The only thing he knew was that if he pumped a sufficient amount of energy in the city, something drastic would happen.

"Is this a way home for me?"

On second thought, he didn't think it would be so easy. The entire arrangement appeared to be a defensive measure. If an enemy race came and tried to bombard it with directed energy weapons, they would probably receive a nasty surprise.

As for other weapon types? "They look tough enough to withstand kinetic strikes."

Ves experimentally picked up some rocks and threw them at the spirals with force. The crystals never showed signs of breaking.

After this, Ves considered his options. In order to escape his strange state, he should be doing everything he could to find a way back home.

"Nothing ventured, nothing gained."

He decided to brave the unknown because he lacked any alternatives. Without a map or any kind of overview of the terrain, finding another artificial settlement like this would take weeks or months.

Perhaps this planet might not even host any other signs of alien presence!

Thus, Ves distanced himself a fair amount and raised his Amastendirā. He dialed it to a moderate power setting and fired again at the spirals.

The light show that ensued this time carried more energy. The spirals glowed as bright as the sun that had yet to fall below the horizon, a sign that this planet spun a lot slower than the Terran standard.

Rays of light bounced from spiral to spiral until it engulfed the entire city. The lights then began to pulse in unison as if they followed the beat of a drum. The pulsing pattern mesmerized Ves and Lucky, and if not for taking a lot of steps back, he might have temporarily blinded himself.

This time, the city gained a sufficient amount of energy. A small portal emerged above the sky. Ves could tell it was a portal straight away because it led to another location entirely. The portal cut a circular portion the size of his head straight above the center of the city at what looked to be some kind of open temple ground.

"Is this a religious ceremony of some sorts?"

The mystery deepened as Ves cautiously walked closer in order to peek at the other side of the portal.

It was dark there. Only the lights from the city illuminated the terrain on the other side. The portal on the other side appeared to look down on an empty plane that might have been the other side of the planet.

No spiral city existed at the other side. It was completely empty except for a single depression in the middle. The bowl in the ground appeared to house some sort of monument made out of alloy.

The object resembled a series of runes that strung out into an alien sentence. If scaled to a human, it would have been as large as a house. As for now, he could comfortably pick it up with his hands if he felt inclined to do so.

Nothing else appeared on the other side of the portal. Just as Ves lost interest, Lucky became excited all of a sudden. His cat meowed and jumped from his shoulders and flew straight towards the portal.

"Lucky! It's dangerous!"

Ves hesitated to come forward but eventually gritted his teeth and spent his diminishing amount of power to activate his suit's antigrav modules.

Unfortunately, he couldn't keep up with Lucky's speed.

His cat deftly reached the portal and squeezed his body through the other side without bumping at the edges. Once he reached the other side, Lucky cut the base of the monument with his energy claws. The alien alloys parted easily this time, allowing Lucky to grab onto the runes with its teeth.

Once he secured the monument, Lucky manipulated the gravity being exerted on his body and flew back to the portal. He quickly emerged back above the crystal city before its energy fizzled out and the disappeared into the void.

"That was close, Lucky! What if you became trapped on the other side!"

Lucky behaved as if he never heard his scoldings and bumped the monument into his grip. Ves looked at the thing with a strange expression.

"What is this?"

Although he called it a monument, it might not have served such a purpose to the aliens that originally constructed it. Why would they go through the trouble of constructing a crystal city that could open a portal to another place entirely? Why would they leave nothing behind on the other side except for this string of runes?

As he inspected the metallic monument, he realized that the monument's runes corresponded to the runes placed across the city.

"Is this a key somehow?"

Ves had the sense that he got ahold of a passphrase that allowed him to unlock a secured data pad. He frowned a bit. All of this smelled like a puzzle or a test. What kind of alien species was bored enough to set all of this up?

These long-dead alien pranksters left a hell of a mess behind for him. If he wanted to make some progress, he had to follow the clues laid out before him. The runes looked like a good start.

"Hitting the spiral structures with a laser activates a mechanism. Since the rune monuments in the city are made out of the same kind of crystal, then I bet that they can be activated in the same way."

The aliens erected hundreds of rune monuments, each with their own unique shapes. Ves had already tasked his hazard suit to map them all out, so he understood their distribution.

Looking up from above, the runes corresponded with a spiral, but in the shape of a galaxy. It didn't quite conform to the galaxy's appearance in modern times, which made him suspect that this species must have lived an extremely long time ago.

"How many hundreds of millions of years have passed? This city stands as timeless as ever. How come it hasn't been buried beneath a mound of soil?"

Perhaps this planet used to be dotted with crystal cities, but time and neglect had buried them all under the forest and the soil.

"Maybe the place I originally emerged from also contains a means to go back."

If the crystal city didn't offer any solution, then he could only return to the deadly forest and excavate some clues from there.

He stepped closer to the city and tried to touch a crystal rune monument, only for his fingers to slip right through them. "Seems like they can't harm anything in a dormant state."

Ves stepped back again and shot a random monument.

Just like with the spirals, the rune monument glowed and pulsed in white. It persisted in this behavior for over ten minutes before fizzling out.

"I see. Nothing happens if only one of them is active."

He thought he should be able to get a result if he transferred power to the correct sequence of runes within this timespan. Ves looked back at the metallic string of runes in his hand and started to gain a headache?

"Do the aliens read from left or right, or right from left? Do I need to read top to bottom or bottom to top?"

What would happen if he lighted up the wrong sequence? What if he blasphemed the tiny alien's religion by enacting their ritual in reverse?

After several minutes of procrastinating, Ves decided to go out on a limb and read the runes from left to right, going down a row at the end.

He started to raise his Amastendira. Hopefully, he didn't invite a cataclysm with this experiment.

### Chapter 348 Vulcaneye

When Ves was about to fire the rune monuments in the sequence displayed by the key, he suddenly removed his finger from the trigger.

"Wait a minute. Am I missing an opportunity here?"

He looked back on his recent experiences and realized he only fixated on the danger. The fearful environment, dangerous organisms and incomprehensible alien ruins had pushed him out of his comfort zone. He became so sensitive to danger that he only thought about getting back as soon as possible.

"There's no question that it's dangerous here, but am I really at risk right now?"

His semi-corporeal form had already saved him from being electrocuted by the storm trees and being eaten by a giant clawed worm. It might be able to save him from every other threat on this planet.

He hadn't considered taking advantage of his unusual state up to this point. Now that he calmed down, he thought that it would be a waste to miss the opportunity in front of him. How could he forget that the crystal city was a product of a highly-developed alien civilization?

It was chock full of advanced technology!

"Danger and fortune goes hand in hand!"

The Komodo Star Sector fostered a lively community of treasure hunters and fortune seekers. They constantly plowed the unclaimed space beyond the star sector for the opportunity to encounter rich exotic deposits or the remains of alien races.

Ves had practically hit the jackpot! If he didn't remind himself of that, he might have left without picking up the prize!

"This is a marvel of alien engineering." He exclaimed. His eyes gazed hungrily at the dormant crystal city scaled for an alien species that he could easily pinch with his hands.

Diminutive they might be, their mastery of materials, electromagnetic radiation and spacetime surpassed the standard of the Komodo Star Sector by a very wide margin. If Ves took some time to study these ruins, he might be able to decipher some of the principles that underpinned the crystal city!

"This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity!"

Ves understood that humans actually didn't invent most of the technologies they used to this day. Although their race possessed a formidable capacity for

research, they derived most of their advancements from reverse engineering the efforts of other advanced races.

There was nothing wrong with this approach. Many of these ancient alien species used to be formidable, but almost none of them survived to the present. Rather than reinvent the wheel, humanity might as well take a shortcut by stealing the homework of their seniors.

The Age of Conquest had only been a smashing success due to the theft of many alien technologies, such as the FTL drives.

By now, most alien technologies had already been fully explained by the top researchers of the galaxy, but that didn't mean the knowledge was available to everyone. The MTA, CFA and the first-rate superstates monopolized the most groundbreaking technologies, leaving everyone else with an insurmountable disparity.

Hence the need to explore other ruins. The big players provided lavish rewards for anyone who discovered wholly new technologies.

Sadly, humanity had already seen practically everything the galaxy could produce, so realistically it wasn't possible to surprise them anyone. The big boys only provided a modest reward to those who handed over alien technology that they could already reproduce themselves.

Still, even if the MTA and CFA already understood the principles, they still held a lot of value to the smaller players such as the Friday Coalition or the Bright Republic.

Something as strange as teleportation and portal generation should be of prime interest to these states.

Ves didn't plan on revealing this treasure to anyone.

"First, I don't even know what triggered the decahedron. It's unlikely I can replicate the phenomenon again and return to this virgin planet."

He had to make the most out of this accidental trip. He wasn't a professional treasure hunter, after all. He still had to design a new mech and grow his company.

"Second, I won't gain much of an advantage if I share these technologies."

Many stories circulated from the frontier on how treasure hunters got stiffed by their clients. The disparity in power between a bunch of nobodies and the apparatus of a state meant that anyone who offered technology had to swallow their ambitions.

Most of the time, the technology in question wasn't remarkable enough to foster mutual competition between states. It was nice to get to know it, but they wouldn't go the extra mile to attain it. Established states already possessed sufficient confidence in their technology base.

Unless he could explain and reproduce the ability to generate a portal, Ves figured that the Bright Republic wouldn't attach any importance to his discoveries.

"It's better to keep my advancements to myself."

Many older mech designers often kept their specialties to themselves. The technologies they grasped might not be unique in the perspective of the galaxy, but they likely wouldn't have to face a direct competitor that mastered the same advancements.

"This is a way for me to step ahead of the competition."

In light of his intentions to design a rifleman mech, what would be better than to enhance his laser rifles with a new mode of laser propagation?

Not only that, by studying the way in which these crystal builders utilized light, he might be able to enhance his gamma laser rifle and thereby exceed the grading standards of the System's upgrade mission.

"The System always gives me something good whenever I go the extra mile."

From his long interactions with the System, he knew that this ice-cold machine couldn't be cheated. On the other hand, it also wouldn't hold back if Ves aligned with its ideals.

"Let's start grasping the inner workings of these ruins."

Ves approached the crystal city. Even though his state protected him from physical damage, he hadn't ruled out the possibility that the crystal builders mastered a way to harm energy beings.

Nothing happened, thankfully.

He pulled out a portable multiscanner from the toolbelt attached to his hazard suit and began to sample the crystals.

The dinky little thing beeped in alarm.

ERROR. UNIDENTIFIABLE SUBSTANCE DETECTED.

Ves waited and waited, but the scanner only managed to measure some basic properties such as the dimensions and the opacity of the crystal. The machine lacked the capability to accomplish anything more, such as telling him what the crystals actually consisted of.

"Too weak!"

This wasn't any regular old multiscanner! He took it from the Barracuda's lab! This multiscanner had been built according to the standard of a second-rate state.

He frowned at the scanner. "These ruins are too advanced for this scanner. The only way for me to get results is if I get something bigger or something higher tech."

Not every treasure hunter possessed the funds to afford a fancy multiscanner. They often compensated by buying a large, shuttle-sized multiscanner. Their larger size afforded these devices a lot more power and capabilities, and essentially brute-forced their way towards understanding the things they measured.

Ves hadn't expected to go on a treasure hunting expedition when he travelled to the Joe System. If he knew something like this would happen, he wouldn't have left behind the large-scale multiscanner back at Cloudy Curtain.

As for a portable multiscanner that offered more strength than the one he currently held, Ves had no chance of obtaining anything better. The Friday Coalition definitely developed better models, but they never sold them to foreigners.

"Wait a second. I still have another source."

He couldn't forget about the System! The convenience it brought to Ves couldn't be understated. Even if he was cut off from civilization and taken away to a completely unknown planet, he could still buy his way out of a problem.

Perhaps Ves could even return to the Joe System if he bought the correct item!

"Now is not the time to be too anxious. I can think about returning home later. I should first find a way to increase my benefits."

He activated the System and went to the Store page. Since he already destroyed all the spy bugs, he didn't bother activating his Privacy Shield. Ves

quickly browsed the multiscanner section of the Store and came across a variety models. His face quickly turned a little black.

"A hundred-million DP?! Really? Why show something like that to me?!"

Many of the multiscanners offered by the Store made him drool, but their exorbitant price tag scared him off. He had no choice but to consider something cheaper.

"I currently have over 130,000 DP, so I can still buy something that's reasonably capable."

He checked out both the large-scale scanners and the portable versions. The large-scale scanners promised much better performance, but Ves wasn't inclined to buy them due to their bulk.

"This won't be the last time I'll come across something strange. A portable multiscanner is an essential tool for treasure hunters and mech designers alike. It's best to start investing early in this kind of gear."

After half an hour of browsing, Ves had made his choice.

[Vulcaneye - Multiscanner - Level 1]

Price - 100,000 DP

This multi-functional scanner is able to scan and determine the parameters of a large number of substances. It contains over a thousand different measuring modes and it is extremely sensitive up to the nanometer scale.

The level 1 Eye of Vulcan contains a database of over a hundred-thousand different exotic materials. If the Vulcaneye encounters any unknown material, it will update its database and slightly improve its scanning capabilities.

The Vulcaneye caught his attention due to its upgradability. Not every item offered by the Store possessed this trait. From his understanding of the Store,

the items that provided this option usually started weak, but became incredibly formidable when it reached its tenth or higher upgrade tier.

The only downside was that their costs exceeded every other item in the same tier. They weren't really cost effective in terms of DP. The only reason why Ves hung on the Vulcaneye was the possibility of fostering its growth if he bought it early.

"It's much like Lucky. Any piece of technology can be improved along the way."

He could even use his Special Upgrade Voucher (Machine) on the Vulcaneye if it came down to it. Ves had been saving the ticket due to a lack of viable options. Most of the important machines he owned were either too large or too advanced for the voucher to display its full value.

"If this scanner isn't advanced enough to resolve the crystals, I can always use up my voucher."

This would be his safety net. It decreased the risk of making a 100,000 DP mistake. After all, a non-upgradeable scanner only cost him half as much. Ves essentially gambled that the extra 50,000 DP paid off handsomely in the future.

"This is an investment. I shouldn't be too sparing with my DP at this point."

He gritted his teeth and confirmed the purchase. He put aside his old scanner and grabbed hold of the newer one. It appeared a lot slimmer and the scanner module affixed to its front looked like a burning eye.

"Vulcaneye indeed. Let's see if the gaze of a god can make sense of these crystals."

When Ves pointed the Vulcaneye at the nearest crystal spiral, the gadget instantly projected a whole laundry list of data. The raw data confused him for

a bit, but he quickly became ecstatic once he realized that the Vulcaneye easily smashed through the crystal substance's mysterious defenses.

Ves began to pour over the wealth of data projected by the scanner. He also saved a copy of the readouts to his comm for later study.

While he obsessively scanned different crystals from different angles, Lucky began to grow bored and wandered around the inert crystal ruins. The cat yawned and began to rest his body in the middle of the temple at the center of the city.

Ves had no time to play with his pet. The scans excited him beyond measure and pushed beyond the limits of his existing base of knowledge. While he couldn't make sense of most of the readings right now, he still retained a modest reserve of DP.

"Should I still save up the rest of my points?"

#### **Chapter 349 Spending Lavishly**

Ves always treated his DP like treasures. After a spate of troubles early in his career, Ves developed the habit of retaining a reserve of DP.

Points meant power. He could immediately spend his DP on a variety of benefits, from extra Skills to life-saving objects.

Ever since he'd been whisked away by an unknown alien gadget, Ves unconsciously treated his DP as a final failsafe. If he couldn't find a way to get back home, he'd spend his way out of this fix.

The more DP he saved up, the higher the odds of escaping this perilous situation. Many objects became available once he saved up more than 100,000 DP.

Right now, he temporarily shut that door by buying the Vulcaneye. While he could still come up with a couple of solutions with the 30,000 DP he had left, his options became a lot more limited.

"If nothing else, I can still wait until my points climb back up."

The LMC, EME and Vaun constantly sold a substantial number of mechs each day. Each sale generated a little bit of DP, so as long as the Blackbeak design stood strong, he didn't have to worry about his income stream.

"If I don't spend anything now, I'll regret it later on."

What was the use of holding back his spending at this point? He constantly saved it up in order to respond to any threats beyond his capability to solve.

Yet at his current state, Ves feared very few threats. His shield generator and intangible state neutralized most attacks while Lucky and the Amastendira could kill anything that posed a threat to him. Did he truly require an additional safeguard?

"Let's take this opportunity while I can. It's never unjust for me to invest in my Skills."

His Skills broadened his knowledge and remained useful throughout his entire lifetime. The Skills and Sub-Skills he planned to acquire not only helped him understand the crystal city, but also came into use when he moved back to his design projects.

As Ves worked to scan and understand the readers, he bought a number of different Skills from the store.

[Materials Science - Incompetent]: 200 DP

[Materials Science - Novice]: 500 DP

[Materials Science - Apprentice]: 1000 DP

[Materials Science - Journeyman]: 2000 DP

[Crystallography I]: 2000 DP

[Crystallography II]: 4000 DP

Ves acquired another major Skill by acquiring Materials Science and upgrading it directly to Journeyman. At his level of Intelligence, the enormous influx of knowledge and data hardly strained his mind at this point.

He needed this Skill in order to understand the readings of the crystals in their inactive states. He also threw in Crystallography I and II in his shopping list because he realized that he was dealing with a complicated composite crystal made out of several exotic and mundane materials.

"It's not a monolithic block of crystal. It's actually something of an array. I just can't see it with the naked eye because it's all transparent."

The discoveries continued to fascinate him as he peeled back layer after layer of their inner workings. He suspected that the highly complex patterns and arrays acted as circuits that acted according to the intentions of the designers of this creation.

"Deciphering these circuits is beyond me." He shook his head. He had to take a step back and focus on the materials and the way they interacted with energy. "I'll be satisfied if I can figure out how it's able to manipulate light."

Ves suspected that the circuits formed part of a massive system responsible for generating portals. They likely carried out a lot of other functions as well, but Ves knew his limits.

Once he stopped gaining any harvests from scanning the crystals, he considered scanning them when they entered an excited state.

"Lucky! Get out of the city!"

His cat appeared to have fallen asleep. Ves had to float to the center of the tiny city and haul his cat out of the danger spot. Lucky instantly woke up and yowled at being drawn away from his comfortable perch.

"Just stay put over here, will you?"

After Ves dumped his cranky pet well outside the city, he began to perform his first experiment. He shot a random rune monument at the edge with his Amastendira, causing it to light up without affecting any of the other crystal structures.

He then proceeded to point his Vulcaneye at it. The rune monument's active state provided his multiscanner with a lot more data, most of which muddled his mind. Since he still had some DP left over, he might as well solve his confusion with more lavish spending!

[Optics I]: 200 DP

[Optics II]: 1000 DP

[Optics III]: 4000 DP

[Crystal Laser Propagation I]: 2000 DP

[Crystal Laser Propagation II]: 5000 DP

The cost of the Optics Sub-Skills ramped up hard, but Ves urgently needed the knowledge to make sense of the way the crystals treated electromagnetic radiation.

While it helped a lot in finding out how the crystals focused their output, it didn't explain how the crystals converted other sources of energy and turned them into potentially deadly light. After a brief rundown of his Skill Tree, he settled on Crystal Laser Propagation and immediately upgraded the expensive Sub-Skill to the second tier.

Ves discovered that the crystals could even convert pure electricity to light, so they were definitely able to propagate lasers.

"This is what I'm looking for? I have to understand this process!"

Crystal Laser Propagation II provided him with enough knowledge to crack the mystery! The veil in his mind had finally been parted!

The workings of the crystal was exceedingly complicated, and Ves only brushed the surface of how it worked. Still, what he gained up to this point more than made up for his extravagant spending!

"I understand now! It works like this! Hahahaha!"

He always enjoyed it when he learned something new. Now that he grasped something exclusive to most of his peers in the mech industry, how could he be reserved?

To make the long story short, Ves learned a number of new tricks. First, as long as he reproduced the basic makeup of the crystal, he'd be able to repurpose it into any kind of laser weapon no matter the scale.

The crystal functionally replaced at least half of the internal mechanisms of a laser weapon. While the expense would be considerable, it took up much less space than conventional solutions.

What did this mean?

He freed up a lot of space for additional features such as larger batteries and heat sinks! He'd be able to pile them up while avoiding any bloat!

Ves thought about how such a weapon looked like. His cheer disappeared somewhat when he realized that such laser rifles already existed in the Komodo Star Sector.

"I'm not the first one who came up with this."

In fact, some of the more expensive mainstream models wielded laser rifles that worked on the same principles. The crystals that formed the core of their weapon's performance might utilize vastly different materials and patterns, but the principles that governed their workings shouldn't be any different.

Ves cursed at the alien city. "Stupid aliens! Invent something original next time!"

It couldn't be helped. The fallen alien race wasn't to blame for this outcome. The human race advanced too much and worked out the principles behind too many pieces of alien technology.

"Even if I'm not the first one who discovered these principles, I still obtained enough of an advantage."

Knowledge about these special crystals should be hard to come by. Ves bet that not even the Clifford Society offered anything like this in their Moon Library. Leemar's club of talents didn't hesitate to offer basic knowledge, but it always kept the best for their inner circle.

After deciphering the special crystals, he also understood why it hadn't become ubiquitous in the Bright Republic.

"It's extremely hard to design these crystals. It's even harder to fabricate them, and expensive to boot."

Without understanding all of the theory behind it, anyone who tried to pirate it would likely end up wasting their time. Only true understanding opened the way towards employing the special crystals in their own products.

Ves was very glad with his harvest up to this point. He finally put away the Vulcaneye because he didn't think he could learn anything else. He already scanned the city from top to bottom, so he could always study the readings later.

Right now, Ves hungered for a different kind of harvest.

Through his extensive studies of the crystal city, Ves gained the idea that the rune monuments acted as a variable input mechanism.

"It's too extravagant to place hundreds of runes but only use a dozen of them or so. Even if it's some kind of lock or puzzle, it still doesn't justify the cost."

While he couldn't make any judgements on the rationality of the crystal builders, he thought they should not be wasteful to that extent. The crystal city appeared to be a marvel of efficiency. The crystal builders hardly devoted any space for leisure or other activities.

Thus, if they built extra runes, they definitely served a purpose. And Ves thought he grasped the secret.

"It's much like a keyboard. The runes present certain meanings, and by lighting them up one by one, I can form a complex meaning out of any number of simple ones."

The only problem was that Ves had no clue on how the rune language worked. He was a complete stranger with regards to this long-dead alien construction.

He decided to employ the dumbest method of testing them out. He'd shoot a random sequence of runes and see what the crystal city spat out.

"It's not like I can be harmed. I can keep activating the runes until my laser pistol runs out."

The Amastendira never ran out of charge as long as Ves rationed its power carefully.

Since he put down most of his worries, he enacted his makeshift plan.

Ves shot fifteen runes in succession, the same amount depicted by the key. He didn't choose any of the runes displayed by the recovered object, though. If it turned out this sequence brought him back home, then he didn't wish to trigger this procedure early.

After lighting up the fifteenth rune, the crystal spirals began to glow as well.

Sure enough, the crystal city accepted a fixed input of fifteen runes.

Light stretched out from the fifteen runes and hit a number of different spirals. Some spirals got hit by multiple beams of light. Once the rune monuments kept up their channeling for a couple of minutes, something majestic happened.

The spirals shot out several beams of light straight towards Ves and Lucky! The beams ran through both of them and scorched the ground underneath their feet!

Lucky panicked and jumped and Ves almost pissed his pants. If not for their intangibility, the lasers might have fried them to a crisp. That was close!

"These aliens sure didn't mess around."

Even after their death and descent into obscurity, these tiny aliens hadn't held back their hostility.

After Ves calmed down Lucky and his own heart, he began to try again. He shot out another random sequence of fifteen runes, making sure to record their shapes and the order in which he lighted them up.

This time, a different set of spirals lighted up. His hopes momentarily went up, but quickly fell back down when the spirals attempted to kill him again.

"That's a dud."

He proceeded to repeat this experiment again and again. He held a faint misconception that he was constantly buying lottery tickets that failed to deliver any prizes. The only reason why he kept on buying them was because he could buy them for free.

The only thing he really spent was time.

"As long as I have time, I don't see why I can't win!"

He tried out hundreds of sequences. It became such a chore that he stopped keeping track of which runes he hit and at what order he hit them. It hardly mattered as the chance of hitting the exact same runes was minimal.

The spirals shot at him so many times that the ground beneath him had become charred beyond recognition.

The crystal city finally displayed a different reaction at the 865th attempt. For once, the spirals didn't shoot at him. Instead, it opened up another portal in the sky above the temple. This time, it led to a different location.

### Chapter 350 Spirituality

Ves vaguely imagined sitting in front of his terminal trying to browse the galactic net by pressing fifteen random keys.

The difference between browsing the galactic net and trying his luck with the crystal city was that the former at least returned something.

As for Ves, it took more than half a standard day to persist in his gambling. It had been incredibly mind-numbing for him to repeat the same routine for more than eight-hundred times.

At the very least, Ves got to practice his marksmanship. He began to get used to wielding the large but elegant Amastendira. Despite being a little larger than a regular laser pistol, it weighed remarkably little.

He had the sense the gunsmith made it for a woman. As a designer himself, he easily picked up the clues. The weapon carried a feminine touch that would put any woman at ease once they wielded the Amastendira.

Still, it had also been designed for an expert. The complete lack of targeting systems and aim assistance made the weapon difficult to hack, but the wielder had to rely on their own skills to make the best of the weapon.

His marksmanship hadn't improved all that much even with all of the practice. He possessed no talent in this area at all, though part of it could be blamed on

his below-average dexterity. He did managed to get comfortable with wielding the Amastendirra. The muscle memory he built up would allow him to wield the weapon with much less hesitation during battle.

"There's got to be a purpose in these runes. So long as the light beams can't hurt me, I should keep going."

Evidently, the crystal city's 'galactic net' was a lot smaller than that of humanity. It took more than eight-hundred random lottery draws for Ves to draw a prize.

Ves had not expected the crystal city to open another portal. He walked closer to the city with Lucky in tow and peered through the gap.

This time, the portal led to a lifeless moon-like area. The area beyond the portal was obviously in some sort of vacuum environment, but the portal somehow prevented the air from this side to leak to the other side.

"These aren't simple portals. There's a lot more going on behind the scenes."

Ves quickly whipped up the Vulcaneye and began to scan the active rune monuments and crystal spires as well as the small portal. His fancy new multiscanner hadn't failed him so far and spat out a bunch of raw data that he saved into logs for later study.

Just a simple glance at the data from the Vulcaneye's observation of the portal made him dizzy. This was far beyond his range of expertise.

"There's no point for me to understand this stuff."

He closed the projection of the readouts and let the Vulcaneye work on its own. Instead, he turned his attention to what lay at the other side of the portal.

To the small-statured aliens, the moonscape appeared to host some kind of palace. The majestic structure adopted a very different aesthetic standard

than the crystal city. The crystal possessed a blue-ish tint and the palace incorporated a lot of hexagonal shapes.

It looked like a honeycomb gone mad.

"Did it belong to a different ethnic group or class? Or a separate state?"

He lacked the context to figure out the relations between the crystal city and the crystal palace, but obviously the two shared some relations. Why else would the crystal city possess a rune sequence that led to this moon?

In any case, Ves figured the crystal palace might be hiding something good. He wasn't about to let the tiny portal stop him from attempting to loot what looked to be another alien ruin.

"Even if the crystal city is empty, I don't believe the aliens cleaned up every ruin."

This time, the portal on the side of the moon hovered fairly close above the crystal palace. While he could still stretch out his arm through the portal, he didn't want to take the risk of cutting off his limb when the portal abruptly closed.

"It's safer for me to find out first how long the portal lasts."

Ves waited for another two minutes before the glowing crystal spirals dimmed and the portal fizzled.

The portal lasted a little bit less than three minutes.

He suspected that this might not be the end of it. Ves shot the same sequence of runes again, but this time he used a higher power setting on the Amastendira. Fortunately, his comm had recorded every sequence and even pointed out the location and order of the runes.

Once the portal emerged yet again, Ves patiently waited at the sides with a timer keeping track of how long it stayed open.

This time, the portal lasted over five minutes.

"So my guess is correct. The portals last longer as long as I pump more power into the crystal city."

While he expected this result, he actually hoped for a different outcome. At this time, the portal was only wide enough to squeeze his head through the gap, and only if he took off his hazard suit's helmet.

The diameter of this portal was more than ample enough for the crystal builders to convey an army or a convoy of transports. It was wholly inadequate for Ves to slip to the other side without cutting himself into a sausage.

He did not want to find out what would happen to him if he brushed the edges of the portal.

"Alright Lucky. Go on and dig out that palace. If you see anything interesting, bring it back to me."

Lucky resentfully meowed at him, but obeyed his instructions anyway. Ves reopened the portal again with fifteen powerful laser beams. That should provide Lucky with an ample amount of time to root out the crystal palace.

Once the portal stabilized, Lucky curiously flew to the other side. He momentarily lost control due to the lack of air resistance and the differences in gravity, but he quickly regained control of his floating body.

His cat looked around a bit and didn't spot anything on this moonscape besides the palace. Lucky floated to the top of the palace and curiously landed his paw at it. The limb went straight through the hexagonal roof as if it didn't exist, but Lucky didn't let that stop him. A faint glow appeared on the limb and this time the cat managed to pat the roof.

Nothing happened. Ves figured if the crystal palace possessed any defenses, it had long been drained of any power. Unless Ves shot his Amastendira at the palace, it shouldn't be able to rouse any defenses.

"Wait a moment." Ves abruptly realized an important fact. "Why is Lucky able to touch the crystal palace all of a sudden?"

He realized that Lucky had already done something similar by cutting off the rune key monument in his previous portal jaunt. Ves hadn't thought about it back then, but now it was more than obvious that Lucky possessed a way to interact with the material world if he chose to. How did he do it?

Then he thought back to the time on the Glowing Planet when Lucky repelled the semi-corporeal devourer king with his energy claws. His cat already gained the ability to straddle the divide between the lower and higher dimensions back then.

"Is that because he ate all of those exotics and Rorach's Bone?"

Lucky hadn't eaten any of the higher grades of Rorach's Bone at the time. After that, he ate a whole bunch of medium-grade ores as well as a sumptuous piece of high-grade Rorach's Bone.

"Rorach's Bone is especially valuable because it's one of the few exotic materials that's able to facilitate and amplify the resonance between a mech pilot and his mech."

What did resonance actually mean?

"Does it refer to spirituality?"

Ves recalled that Lucky's status contained a skill called Spirituality I. Was this the secret to resonance, the X-Factor and semi-corporeality?

A bomb exploded in his mind as various clues, suspicions, inferences and conclusions melded together into a single overarching hypothesis.

Ever since the System set him on the path to understanding the X-Factor, he always felt he tread a path that few had ever walked. Even if others suspected that spirituality lay at the root of these amazing phenomena, humanity possessed no means to observe or interact with this nebulous concept.

Only Ves gained the ability to interact with this concept because he possessed a nascent sixth sense. As one of the few people who could see in a crowd of blinded people, he constantly progressed towards a unifying set of assumptions that he could tentatively gather into a convincing theory.

Right now, it was if the last pieces of the puzzle had filled the gaps that annoyed him for ages. If Ves previously parted the veil, now he fully managed to pull back the curtain.

"It's all in the mind!"

As Lucky attempted to chip away at the crystal palace with his energy claws, Ves turned his attention inward as his knowledge on Spirituality finished sublimating in his mind.

An unprecedented feeling of satisfaction ran through his intangible body. He felt as if he solved a problem that trillions of humans had puzzled over ever since the Age of Mechs came into being.

No one understood how Apprentice Mech Designers advanced into Journeyman Mech Designers. Similarly, neither did humanity figure out how to transform an advanced mech pilot into an expert mech pilot.

Ves believed that both of these rare and highly-valued professions required a breakthrough into a person's spirituality. Mech designers had to possess spirituality to design a mech that fostered resonance, while mech pilots used spirituality to activate the resonance lying dormant in their mechs.

"I see now! They're both connected!"

He already uncovered the pieces, but fitting them altogether required a bold step in thinking. Even though Ves hadn't fully tested out his hypotheses, he strongly believed he was on the right track.

The importance of his conclusions couldn't be overstated. The issues that Ves figured out had stumped humanity for over four-hundred years. If humanity had already mastered spirituality, then a lot more higher-tiered mech pilots would exist at this time.

"Right now, even the mightiest human entities in the galaxy can't reliably pump out expert mech pilots."

Sure, compared to a tiny state like the Bright Republic, the big boys like the MTA and the first-rate superstates had a lot more elite pilots on their retainer. But that was simply a function of their influence and the amount of people they could draw on.

The MTA recruited their mech pilots from all of human space, while the first-rate superstates occupied the largest and most densely populated star sectors. If Ves looked at the amount of elite pilots relative to the total population, then the more prosperous states and organisations didn't hold an overwhelming advantage in this area.

In his eyes, their much-vaunted secret training regimes had a lot of things in common with quackery and superstition. They fumbled blindly in the dark and figured out a handful of tricks that increased the odds of allowing an advanced mech pilot to make a breakthrough to the next tier.

Ves had progressed beyond that stage. Had his breakthrough been enough to finally receive the System's acknowledgment? He quickly summoned up his Status.

[Status]

Name: Ves Larkinson

Profession: Apprentice Mech Designer

Specializations: None

Design Points: 8,353

Attributes

Strength: 1.3

Dexterity: 0.8

Endurance: 1.9

Intelligence: 1.8

Creativity: 1.9

Concentration: 1.7

Spirituality: 0.4

Neural Aptitude: F

Skills

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

[Battle Mechatronics]: Apprentice - [Knight Mech Mastery I]

[Business]: Apprentice

[Computer Science]: Incompetent

[Electrical Engineering]: Journeyman - [Structural Pathway Configuration III] - [Energy Storage IV] - [Conductors III]

[Materials Science]: Journeyman - [Crystallography II] [Crystal Laser Propagation II]

[Mathematics]: Journeyman

[Mechanics]: Journeyman - [Jury Rigging III] [Speed Tuning IV]

[Metallurgy]: Journeyman - [Alloy Compression III]

[Metaphysics]: Novice - [X-Factor II]

[Physics]: Journeyman - [Directed Energy Weapon Optimization II] [Gamma Laser Weapons I] [Lightweight Armor Optimization I] [Mediumweight Armor Optimization IV] [Melee Weapon Optimization IV] [Rapid-Fire Laser Weapon Operation II] [Optics III]

[Salvaging]: Apprentice

[Signals and Communications]: Journeyman

Abilities

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

Evaluation: A post-human mech designer pioneering the field of metaphysics.

He did it! His Metaphysics Skill had advanced to Novice! The System also acknowledged his achievements in the X-Factor by turning it into a formal Sub-Skill.

"What's this? Another Attribute?"

His Attribute section received a curious new addition. "Only 0.4 Spirituality? Oh come on!"

Ves understood that all the other Attributes scaled around 1. A score of 1 meant his Attribute was average compared to the rest of humanity.

The abnormally low score of 0.4 in the case of Spirituality obviously didn't fit in with this standard. Unless an entire civilization of humans existed with a formidable amount of strength in this Attribute, Ves figured that the System didn't wish to inflate his current strength.

Indeed, Ves had a lot more to go before he could imitate Lucky's strengths.

