

## Mech 4071

### Chapter 4071 Hopecrest Mech Academy

The Maylard System was one of the many star systems in the Krakatoa Middle Zone where humanity had set foot.

Located relatively far away from port systems such as Davute, the Maylard System did not stand out as an attractive colonization target.

The star system was rather small and did not host a lot of planets. If not for the fact that prospectors managed to find a decent amount of junk exotics and low-grade exotics, it wouldn't have attracted any interest in the first place!

In the end, an alliance that consisted of nine different groups that originated from the same state in the galactic rim chose to plant their flag on a planet called Maylard II. The L9 Alliance did not have a lot of competition due to the star system's remoteness and its lack of lucrative and strategic resources.

Maylard II was located relatively far from the local star. Originally, the planet was not capable of bearing life, but many of its conditions were so good that it did not take a lot of effort to make it habitable for human habitation.

Even so, the colonists weren't able to pay that much to terraform the planet, so the company responsible for transforming its ecology had rushed the job while minimizing costs as much as possible.

The result was a planet that was technically habitable but not that all pleasant to live on. The climate was temperate at best but often swung violently during certain seasons. Blankets of snow could drop from the skies at any moment and it required the colonists to improvise many solutions in order to cultivate their own crops.

The colonists lived a hard life on Maylard II, but they largely preferred it this way because their lives back home were worse. Every group that was part of the L9 Alliance were originally collectives that united the interests of disadvantaged communities of a state from the old galaxy.

The people from that planet were truly miserable back then! They had to unite with several other groups from the same state and pool their resources together to organize and fund a colonization effort.

While they managed to reach their destination, not all went well.

Of the nine original settlements that each of the groups had founded on Maylard II, Centire Hill was by far the poorest and smallest of them. Even after receiving a modest

amount of assistance from the rest of the L9 Alliance, the frontier town still didn't amount to anything impressive!

The reason for that was because the Unicum Group that founded this colonial settlement had lost one of its vital colony ships during the journey to the Maylard System!

The loss of construction equipment, pre-fab structures, industrial machines and people dealt a heavy blow to the colonists of the Unicum Group. While other settlements were already turning into cities, Centire Hill still hadn't provided permanent housing to each of its colonists!

Given how little the Unicum Group had to work with, its leaders had to scale back their plans for a mech academy.

The Hopecrest Mech Academy was a struggling institution that was only capable of providing primary mech piloting education to mech cadets.

This meant that while it was capable of instilling the basics of the profession to its students, it was unable to provide more advanced courses that could prepare mech pilots for more serious jobs and specializations.

Out of all of the nine recently-founded mech academies on Maylard II, Hopecrest ranked at the bottom!

This was clearly evident when the mech cadets from rival institutions beat the Hopecrest cadets up in virtual simulation battles.

While the cadets from the better-funded mech academies on the planets were making reasonable progress every month, the ones that were attending Hopecrest were struggling to make progress!

The reasons for that were too many to count. The Unicum Group's setback not only meant that Hopecrest wasn't able to invest in a lot of facilities, but also lost the batch of training mechs reserved for the mech academy!

Though Hopecrest was able to scrounge together a dozen or so training mechs on short notice from various sources, this was wholly inadequate to serve over 800 mech cadets!

Plenty of mech cadets who attended Hopecrest felt miserable. Why were they stuck at the worst mech academy of the L9 Alliance while the kids living in one of the other settlements on the planet were able to enjoy a live practice session every school day?

Mickey Lankos was one of the kids who envied the members of the other groups. If not for the fact that he and everyone else in Centire Hill were bound to the Unicum Group

by contract, they would have chosen to abandon this shaky colony settlement and move to one of the better ones a long time ago!

Still, it wasn't as if they had the money to do so in the first place.

As he and hundreds of other mech cadets arrived at the campus and readied themselves for another day of boring lectures and monotonous simulation practice sessions, it quickly became clear that this was not a normal day.

The mech instructors had brought every mech cadet out into an open field.

"What's going on?"

"Have they finally decided to disband this crappy mech academy?"

"I heard from my uncle that Hopecrest doesn't have any money to buy more training mechs. Will they try to raise their tuition fees so that they can buy a few more machines?"

Every cadet went quiet as the principal of Hopecrest finally floated into view.

The dean was the only person in the mech academy that could give decent lessons. As a former mercenary commander who used to run a small outfit in the past, he possessed both leadership skills and combat experience.

The mech cadets all fell silent while standing at attention. They still respected the old fellow even if he was trying to perform an impossible job.

Usually, the dean always looked troubled or burdened. This time was different though as the retired mercenary commander showed a rare smile.

"Good morning, cadets." The man spoke, his amplified voice reaching the ears of every mech cadet. "I won't say any nonsense. All of you are aware that our mech academy has been struggling. We have heard your complaints and we have tried to address them as best as possible, but we have only achieved limited results so far. That ends today."

A strange sense of anticipation spread throughout the ranks of cadets. The dean sounded different than before.

"I would like to officially announce that the Unicum Group and our very own Hopecrest Mech Academy have managed to come into contact with a charitable foundation. Through our unrelenting efforts to highlight our academy's dire state, we have succeeded in securing a charitable grant!"

Shock spread throughout the ranks as the cadets tried to process the news. Had a charity truly taken pity on their shabby mech academy? Why? There was nothing about

Hopecrest that was worth the attention of rich folk who had too much money on their hands!

The dean did not address the obvious skepticism from his jaded students and proceeded with his announcement.

"The grant is relatively specific, but will immediately benefit you all. You see, the Larkinson Veteran Foundation has noticed our lack of training mechs and has decided to donate 100 brand-new training mechs! These training mechs are nothing like the second-hand machines our academy has been struggling to keep running all this time. No, these training mechs are different. They are the latest product released by a mech company called the Living Mech Corporation, which is owned and run by the Larkinson Clan!"

Mickey wanted to scratch his head. All of these new and weird names belonged to the same people.

At this time, a small commission took place when a few sharp-eyed cadets noticed movement from the gray skies.

A group of transports had descended from orbit and were on their way to Centire Hill!

The transport vessels did not stop at the settlement itself but flew straight towards the mech academy that was located a small distance away.

When the identical cargo-bearing ships stopped above the campus of Hopecrest, they opened their hatches to allow the brand-new mechs residing inside to exit and slowly use their flight systems to land on the ground!

Every mech cadet struggled to remain at attention as these heavy machines touched down on the ground one by one.

The training mechs immediately captivated their attention.

The gleaming mechs looked so much more polished than the rust buckets that the cadets only sporadically had the chance to pilot. Anyone with a decent eye could see that they were not only newer, but also a lot more powerful than pretty much any other training mech available on Maylard II!

Not only that, the new training mechs also exuded a vibe that caused Mickey and every other mech cadet to feel as if they needed to hop inside the cockpit no matter what. Each of them that sought to prove themselves felt that they could obtain exactly what they needed as long as they could pilot these new machines!

The dean kept smiling as the transports eventually delivered all 100 War Squires.

"As you can clearly see behind me, I was not joking. I would love to introduce these fantastic training mechs to you myself, but I think it is best to let their designer introduce them to you in person."

A large projection came to life above the dean. Every cadet quickly became fascinated by the 'designer' that appeared in view.

Was this a mech designer? Mickey and the other cadets could scarcely believe that this man was one of those nerd scientists!

The man in the projection exuded an overflowing amount of strength and confidence. He carried himself around as if he not only knew how to handle himself in a fight, but also won a few of them! His resplendently decorated red combat armor looked vastly more impressive than the ones worn by other soldiers of the L9 Alliance!

"Greetings, cadets." The projected man finally spoke. "I am Patriarch Ves Larkinson, the founder of the Larkinson Clan, the Living Mech Corporation and the Larkinson Veteran Foundation, among other organizations. Aside from that, I am also a Journeyman Mech Designer. The mechs you see in front of your eyes are all the latest products of my work."

The training mechs all lit up as if to signal that they had all come alive!

The speech, which the Larkinsons had apparently recorded in advance, continued after that.

"My new War Squire model represents a new evolution of training mechs that is bound to become the standard in the education sector. While many of you might become surprised or overwhelmed at all of its new features, remember that it is a mech that is designed to help you become a better mech pilot. It is your friend, and if you trust it to guide your piloting journey, you will surely be able to outperform your peers."

Some of the mech cadets started to feel strange after hearing this. Why did it sound as if this new mech was loaded with dubious features?

A few of them even started to guess whether this supposed donation was not as innocent as it sounded. What if it was actually an attempt to use Hopecrest's mech cadets as unwitting test pilots for this newly developed training mech?!

"You are the future of Krakatoa." The projection of Ves spoke. "As the first mech pilots to complete your studies in this new dwarf galaxy, you must be prepared to fight entirely new threats that humanity has never prepared to fight in the past. You are the defenders who will protect your fellow humans against the aliens, beasts and other horrors lurking in the Red Ocean. My training mechs can help you prepare for this heavy responsibility."

Mickey and many other mech cadets unconsciously felt more proud of themselves than before. They hadn't really considered themselves as noble defenders until now.

"Do not mistake the new mechs for mere machines." The man in the armor emphasized. "You may not fully understand this truth right away, but let me give you an important lesson. My War Squires are alive. They are intelligent but more importantly they have feelings. When you pilot them for the first time, you aren't controlling a large machine. You are starting a new relationship with the mind behind the machine. Try your best to respect your living battle partner and be open to its advice. You would be surprised how much it knows about combat. No matter whether you are training to become a melee mech pilot, a ranged mech pilot or something else, the War Squire model is your gateway to greatness. Enjoy your new training mechs and do not forget what I said!"

Every mech cadet knew that Hopecrest was no longer the same after receiving this donation.

Shortly after the announcement finally came to an end, the mech cadets were all begging to pilot the War Squires right away!

"Hold your horses! Not so fast, you brats! We need to check these mechs ourselves and see whether they are safe. You'll have your turn, just not today."

Hopecrest delayed the introduction of the War Squires for three whole days. The wait was agonizing for the mech cadets who could see and even feel the mechs from their classrooms but were not allowed to pilot them until the mech instructors completed their inspection!

Chapter 4072 Rabarber

The entire Hopecrest Mech Academy boiled with excitement!

In fact, the whole settlement of Centire Hill burst with joy and satisfaction!

A powerful clan that was based in Davute had randomly decided to gift 100 premium training mechs to one of the most pathetic mech academies in Krakatoa. How could the citizens of the Unicum Group not grow excited?

If not for the contract that the Unicum Group had signed with the Larkinson Veteran Foundation and if not for highly advanced security settings that guaranteed that the new War Squires only worked properly at a specific site, the Unicum Group was tempted to sell the donated machines and use the proceeds to buy more useful supplies!

Regardless, the Unicums were extremely grateful for this gift as the generous gift not only spared them from spending their limited funding on training mechs, but also

ensured that the quality of their local mech pilots would improve and at least keep up with the other groups on Maylard II.

No one was more excited to take the new War Squires for a spin than the mech cadets themselves!

Each of them had seen enough glimpses of the mechs from a distance to know that they were absolutely remarkable!

They even doubted whether the combat mechs of the Unicum Group could beat the War Squires in a straight battle!

For several days, hardly any mech cadet could pay attention to the lectures. The mech instructors all found it troublesome that their students were constantly being distracted by the thought of piloting those new and gleaming training mechs that had captured their imagination.

"These kids." One of the teachers shook her head. "These boys and girls don't know how lucky they are for gaining access to those brand-new machines."

Another teacher smiled when he saw that a class of cadets had all run towards the yard where the new mechs were being tested. "It's better for them to get lost in fascination than to lose hope in their futures. They're so much brighter and happier now that it is as if the doom and gloom of the last week did not even exist."

Hopecrest finally started to look and feel like a real mech academy with this single donation. Everyone was grateful for the Larkinson Clan for giving them this massive boost, though most of them didn't really have a good idea of what it stood for in the first place.

For this reason, Mickey Lankos and many other mech cadets had jumped onto the galactic net and researched what the Larkinson Clan and the Living Mech Corporation was all about.

The stories they read and the mechs they learned about struck them like thunder!

"The Larkinson Patriarch is an amazing mech designer!"

"His Valkyrie line of mechs went on to fight in a huge war!"

"Look at their expert mechs! I can truly feel they are special!"

"What is that?! How can mechs possibly gather together and unleash a giant energy wave?!"



As the mech cadets kept gossiping about what they learned from the galactic net, they built up more and more anticipation for the moment when they could finally pilot a War Squire for the first time.

According to the stories of the mech pilots who had personal experience with piloting the mechs developed by the Larkinson Clan, the first time was always special. The cadets not only had to cherish this moment, but also do their best to develop a good relationship with their living mechs!

No one really understood why the products sold by the LMC were called 'living' mechs when they were just probably carrying a really smart helper AI system, but whatever.

"C'mon! When do we finally get a turn? The mechs are right there! They don't look broken or shoddy at all. A group as big and powerful as the Larkinsons wouldn't have delivered the training mechs to us if they were broken."

After an agonizing wait, the mech cadets finally received the good news!

When they showed up in class that morning and directed hopeful looks at their first lecturer, the man finally supplied an answer that was different from yesterday!

"All of you will have your chance of piloting the War Squires in your next scheduled live practice session." The teacher announced. "Each of you will be able to enjoy them for a full hour. Not only that, you will also be in for a special treat. Every War Squire comes with a connection to a 'Mental Simulation Training System', a new form of simulation technology that is proprietary to the Living Mech Corporation."

"Sir! How good are the simulators?!" A cadet asked.

Their current teacher was not a mech pilot but instead a physics teacher.

The man smiled. "I am told they are far superior to the simulations provided by our old simulator pods. Much of the delay is caused by the need to understand the capabilities of this included simulation system and to make sure it is safe to use. It is based on new technology and can produce unintended effects."

No one cared about the dangers. From the moment the cadets heard that this simulation system was based on new technology, they all became hooked!

Having spent a lot of frustrating moments with the cheap and second-hand simulator pods that fell behind the ones used by the other mech academies on the planet, the cadets of Hopecrest were eager to be the ones that used the best tech this time!

The day passed quickly before the class that Mickey Lankos belonged to finally received its turn to interface with the War Squires for the first time.



When Mickey and his young classmates changed into their piloting suits, they all treated it as a solemn ritual.

They weren't suiting up to pilot old and ramshackle training mechs that had been deemed too old and worn out by the other mech academies.

They could finally pilot a mech that was both new and modern!

That alone was a massive breakthrough to the mech cadets that never had the privilege of piloting anything fancier!

Mickey and the rest of his classmates eagerly gathered at the field where they held their usual live practice sessions.

A handful of instructors were already present. Hardly any of the kids paid attention to them though as the War Squires standing behind them were just too impressive!

Each of the mechs still looked as new and gleaming as the day they arrived from the air. The War Squires made a clear martial impression by how it resembled the form of a classic knight errant but with a few modern and embellished touches.

Their cool appearance along with the eager vibes emanating from their frames spoke to the heart of every teenager no matter if they were potentates or not. It was as if the War Squire was explicitly designed to capture the hearts of every kid that dreamed of piloting mechs into battle one day!

"Cadets, the moment you have all been waiting for has arrived." The head instructor told them all. "Each of you have already gained a sufficient amount of experience in piloting our other training mechs, so we expect you to control yourselves and handle the War Squires responsibly. Do not forget that my fellow instructors and I possess hard overrides to all of the training mechs. If you do not obey instructions and move exactly how I tell you to, we will press the button and deprive you of the right to pilot the War Squire in the future. Have I made myself clear?"

"Yes, sir!"

The mech cadets all shook and reined in their enthusiasm. Mickey guessed that one of them had become a bit too eager when interfacing with the War Squire for the first time and tried to go wild.

This went against the most important rules that they had been taught since the beginning of their academy days!

The instructor conveyed a few more instructions. It turned out that they would spend half of the session slowly getting used to moving the War Squires.

Once they gained a basic degree of familiarity with the new mechs that supposedly felt and moved like no other machine on the market, the cadets would finally enter the so-called Mental Simulation Training System and undergo a unique introductory course!

The head instructor smirked. "The Living Mech Corporation has prepared a special welcome to every cadet that engages the MSTS for the first time. Personally, I feel the Larkinsons have overdone it, but... maybe it will be good for you to open your eyes."

It sounded as if this MSTS was an even greater deal than what the mech cadets thought!

"Before you go on and interface your assigned War Squires, let me inform you of an additional rule. The War Squire cannot provide you with unlimited access to the MSTS. The manufacturer has set a rule that you actively have to pilot it for at least 4 hours in order to access the MSTS for 1 hour. Don't ask us why this restriction exists. We are already in the process of changing your class schedules to adapt to this rule, but luckily for you, you get a free pass for your first time."

After the instructor finally completed his lecture, every mech cadet finally received permission to approach their War Squires.

"Our War Squires can be identified by both their numbers and their individual names. Remember them, because the Living Mech Corporation has informed us that you will have the best training experience if you pilot the same training mech."

The training mech assigned to Mickey was War Squire #47, which was also named Rabarber.

Apparently, Mickey would be sharing Rabarber with at least eight other cadets for the rest of the year.

While Hopecrest was an awful mech academy in many aspects, it was excellent in at least one aspect.

There was plenty of space available on Maylard II. Hopecrest possessed large training fields that offered plenty of space for dozens if not hundreds of mechs at a time.

Every War Squire that had been prepared for use were spaced far apart from each other. This prevented the mech cadets from damaging other machines if they somehow lost control over their own mechs.

As soon as Mickey approached War Squire #47, he felt it. The much-hyped glow that he read about on the galactic net was truly amazing and remarkable in ways he couldn't describe.

"Is this really what mechs can do these days?" He whispered to himself.

He already felt this sensation from a distance, but now that he had come close enough to throw a stone at it, the War Squire just called to him in a way that compelled him to pilot it right away!

Mickey took a deep breath and floated up to the chest of the mech and slipped inside the opening.

"Even the cockpit of this new mech is fantastic!"

The interior of the cockpit looked like a warrior's abode. Not only was it luxuriously furnished, but the metal surfaces that were ordinarily empty were carved stylized reliefs of mech battles and heroes vanquishing over villains.

Combined with the War Squire's glow that constantly built up his desires, Mickey felt more eager and motivated to train to become an awesome mech pilot in the future!

He soon took his seat and waited until a thick neural interface helmet dropped onto his head.

An agonizing few minutes passed by until the mech instructor finally passed on the command that Mickey and the other cadets wanted to hear.

"Boot up your training mechs."

As soon as Mickey pressed the big central button, the entire cockpit and everything around it came to life in a more literal way than he could ever imagine!

The young thirteen year-old mech cadet's eyes shook continuously as the most pleasurable and enjoyable interfacing experience overtook his mind for the very first time!

As soon as he completed the initial connection procedure, he felt as if his body and awareness had expanded in a way that made him feel as if he literally embodied the War Squire.

Not only that, he felt a presence through the man-machine connection that instinctively welcomed his arrival.

War Squire #47 was ready to turn him into a powerful mech pilot.

Chapter 4073 Interactive Helpers

The War Squire model was substantially different from every other training mech on the market.

There was no lastgen or currentgen model that could come close to the piloting experience of a living training mech.

The only machine that came close was the Larkinson Clan's exclusive Chiron model, but it had never been available on the market.

All of this meant that the War Squire was truly the first living training mech available to the public!

All of the mech cadets that had received the opportunity to pilot their assigned War Squires for the first time instantly became engrossed in the experience.

One of the strong points of the LMC's products was that they always made the mech pilots feel special.

It was impossible to describe it with words. All of the previous and existing customers of the LMC had used all kinds of words to convey their own experiences, but in the end none of them were able to translate the full gamut of their personal journeys with their living mechs.

Mickey Lankos truly felt more closely connected to Rabarber than any of the previous training mechs he piloted.

Whether they were real or virtual, the mechs he had interfaced with in the past did not welcome him and accommodate him as well as the War Squire.

"No wonder those other mech cadets got too excited!"

He felt so tempted to ignore his instructions and exercise the full responsiveness and range of motion of his new mech!

He wanted to command his War Squire to sprint around the training field and jump like an acrobat!

If not for the fact that the War Squires weren't equipped with any weapons at the moment, he would have swung his weapons and even sought out another training mech to feel what it was like to fight with this fantastic new mech!

However, the head instructor's warnings still rang heavily in his mind. Every mech cadet had been taught to unquestionably obey the instructions of their teachers, so Mickey and the rest still managed to hold back their enthusiasm.

All of the mech instructors had access to large and elaborate control panels that allowed them to monitor the states of the training mechs and their current pilots.

After they verified that nothing went wrong, they passed on another instruction.

"Hold still. Your mech will automatically change shape to adapt to your individual physiques."

Before the mech cadets knew it, they temporarily lost control over the War Squires as they initiated their transformations!

Mickey could see and feel his mech morphing around him. The mech buzzed as advanced mechanisms dynamically adjusted the length of the training mech's limbs.

Even the torso changed shape to a degree. Not only did it become a bit lankier, the center of gravity also shifted to a point that closely matched the center of gravity of Mickey's own body!

If the young mech cadet felt as if he was able to embody the War Squire beforehand, now he truly had the illusion that he was inhabiting a larger version of his own body!

Once the mech instructors finally commanded the mech cadets to perform basic movements and routines with their new War Squires, every single mech cadet moved a lot smoother and more controlled than with any of the training mechs in the past!

"Is this what premium training mechs are really like?"

"This is unreal!"

"If I could train with this training mech from the beginning of my studies, I would have easily been able to beat those smug mech cadets from the other academies!"

The excitement never died down as the mech cadets continued to acclimate themselves with their new War Squires.

Every movement became a joy to them. The more they used the War Squires, the more they fell in love with them. This was a feeling that came from the depths of their hearts.

What was even better was that the mechs actually reciprocated the love and appreciation of their mech pilots!

Although the positive feedback from these emotions were subtle and not entirely obvious, the constant exchange of feelings nonetheless made the mech cadets more enthused about piloting their War Squires.

Time passed by so quickly to the mech cadets in paradise that they did not notice that they reached the next phase of their training session.

"Halt! Return to your designated spots and lock your machines in place."

The War Squires all returned to the middle of the training field and formed a large and dispersed square formation.

Once the training mechs were all locked and unable to make any accidental movements, the mech cadets all received the command to engage the MSTS.

"Each of you will be pulled into your own separate introductory training instances." The head instructor's voice broadcasted in the cockpits of all of the active War Squires. "Although you will be on your own for this ride, we can monitor your state inside and outside of your simulation at all times."

With that, every mech cadet's mind got sucked into the Mental Simulation Training System for the first time in their lives.

Entering the MSTS was unlike entering any other virtual simulation.

Whenever Mickey entered one of Hopecrest's old simulator pods, he felt as if someone plugged a rusty cable to his head and struggled to form a connection with an aging processor.

This was entirely different. Mickey did not feel as if the War Squire was forcing any connections on him. Instead, it was as if a soft blanket surrounded his mind and gently lifted it out of his head and brought it all the way to heaven!

A few seconds passed in reality, but subjectively Mickey felt as if he had soared across an unimaginable distance to arrive in a completely different realm.

When Mickey next opened his 'eyes', he noticed that his body, which had been accurately modeled down to his piloting suit, was floating in deep space.

Distant stars speckled the darkness and the ubiquitous red nebulas that tinged the space around him showed that he was somewhere in the Red Ocean.

Mickey wondered whether he was stuck halfway or entered into a waiting queue.

Fortunately, the MSTS did not keep him waiting for long. A golden shape materialized before his eyes.

It turned out to be a cute, miniaturized version of a golden combat mech that was the size of Mickey's hand!

The model of this mini mech looked familiar to the mech cadet. It resembled one of the Larkinson Clan's exclusive mech models that showed up pretty often in their images and battle footage.

"Hiya, Cadet Mickey!" A distorted electronic male voice sounded from the tiny mech. "Welcome to the Living Mech Corporation's Mental Simulation Training System! This is a simulation system like none other, and it is solely developed to help you and many other mech cadets become the strongest mech pilots that you can become."

"Who are you?" Mickey curiously asked the little AI mech.

"Ah, that is a good question."

The tiny mech made a theatrical bow!

"I am Little Five, one of the many Little Spirits that you will be seeing over the course of your simulation sessions. I will be your guide whenever you engage with our training system. I will also be providing help or advice relating to mech piloting and other matters."

Mickey nodded. Little Five was basically an AI helper.

"What are the other Little Spirits?"

"The MSTS currently hosts several more Little Spirits, with more to come in the future. Let me introduce them to you. First up, here is Little Vee!"

A flame burned next to Little Five. It turned into the shape of a tiny squat shape that resembled a stereotypical fantasy blacksmith dwarf, only with exaggeratingly cute proportions.

Little Vee waved his proportionately tiny hammer at Mickey.

"I'm in charge of running the nuts and bolts of the MSTS." A gruff voice squeezed from the mouth that was hidden behind a bushy and messy long beard. "If you encounter any bugs or get stuck in a glitch, call me and I'll knock some sense into the system!"

"Okay..." Mickey dubiously said. "Shouldn't your dwarf accent be thicker and more... dwarfy?"

"I am not a dwarf!" The tiny dwarf absurdly claimed! "I am a human!"

Mickey couldn't help but chuckle at this funny routine.

Little Five awkwardly coughed and punted Little Vee out of sight. "Don't mind him. You won't be seeing Little Vee often if everything goes right. Anyway, let me introduce you to my next friend, Little Helly!"

A black lotus flower emerged next to the tiny golden mech. The flower bloomed and unfolded until it turned into an adorable child!



The little girl's skin was gray and wore a pitch-black sundress. If not for her brilliant smile, her cute face and the delicate lotus flower attached to her head, Mickey might have mistaken her as a zombie!

Right now, the gray kid directed an impish smile at Mickey. Her bright and sparkling yellow eyes slightly caused the mech cadet to feel nervous for a reason.

"Hello, Mickey." The tiny girl greeted. "My job is a little bit too technical to describe to you in detail, but all you really need to know is that I'm good at psychology and that I always love a good scare."

"So you're the AI counselor around here?" The cadet asked.

Little Helly nodded. "Yup! Don't underestimate my importance. The MSTS is more realistic than any other simulation that you have tried, and that also extends to the fatal scenarios that it can produce. Let me give you an example."

In one moment, Little Helly looked like a cute personification of an AI system.

In the next, Little Helly suddenly turned into a scary abyss that caused Mickey to feel as if his soul was on the verge of getting snuffed by an incredibly deep and unfathomable abyss!

"Just kidding!" The gray girl turned cute and innocent again. "Every mech pilot experiences fear on the battlefield. Don't feel ashamed about it. You're only human. What truly distinguishes the good ones from the bad ones is how they can acknowledge their fears but overcome their instincts and fight despite your entire body and subconscious telling you to cower and shirk. Helping you overcome your fears is one of the strong points of the MSTS."

Once Little Helly finished her introduction, her girly form warped into a lotus flower before it eventually drifted away.

"Let me introduce you to the final Little Spirit that you might see every once in a while." Little Five said.

A tiny star appeared into view that quickly morphed into a little kitten that shone with gold and warmth.

As soon as the kitten appeared, Mickey could not resist the urge to reach out and hold the cute animal in his arms.

Surprisingly, the tactile feedback from the new simulation system was so realistic that Mickey truly felt as if he was holding a real kitten. The adorable feline snuggled in his grasp and responded well when he scratched her chin.

"Nyaaa~"

"What does she do?" Mickey asked as he already felt smitten by this adorable pet.

"Little Gold is here to act cute and cheer you on." Little Five stated. "She doesn't really have any fixed responsibilities. You can think of her as a mascot. If she enjoys your company, she will appear more often in your vicinity. Well, she can cheer you up and help you recover from your frights and failures if you need any care."

"Nyaaa!"

The golden kitten eventually squeezed out of his embrace and waved her paw at Mickey before turning into a star and melting into the background.

While all of these Little Spirits were fun and interesting to a young mech cadet like Mickey, he did not connect to the MSTS in order to play with artificial intelligences.

"When will I get to pilot a virtual mech in this simulation system?" Mickey impatiently asked.

"Now." Little Five's anthropomorphized face grinned.

"What?"

The entire simulated surroundings changed in an instant.

The space around Mickey turned from red to blue and black in an instant, reminding him of the dark and vast space of the old galaxy.

However, the mech cadet was hardly able to appreciate this fact because he had ended up in the middle of a grand battlefield!

"What?!"

Tens of thousands of mechs were fighting and destroying each other from all directions!

Hundreds of sub-capital ships and dozens of capital ships were deploying mechs from their hangar bays or using their bunker mechs to pound each other to pieces!

Laser beams and gauss projectiles whizzed from every direction, making it extremely dangerous to end up in the middle of this battlefield!

When Mickey took a closer look at the mechs that were fighting against each other, he noticed that they were divided into two distinct groups.

The first group all consisted of living mechs that all matched the ones that Mickey had seen when he researched the group that was behind the development of the War Squire.

"Those... those are the mechs of the Larkinson Clan!"

The opposition looked completely different. Divided into three separate mech divisions that all followed their own distinct mech doctrines, many of their humanoid machines had one trait in common.

"These are dwarf mechs!"

It turned out that the MSTS had pulled Mickey and all of his fellow mech cadets into a simulated reproduction of the Battle of Fordilla Zentra!

This was the battle where the Golden Skull Alliance fought against the forces of the former Vulcan Empire!

#### Chapter 4074 Immersive Simulation

What was it like to enter and fight on a real battlefield?

Every mech cadet wanted to know this as soon as they started their studies. No kid could restrain their curiosity and yearning towards actual combat.

Unfortunately, there was no way that any responsible mech academy would bring any of its students to the battlefield. The risks were far too great and there was no way to control everything that took place in such a chaotic environment.

The battlefield was not a classroom! It was not a place for underaged and immature mech cadets either!

The only real taste of large-scale battles that mech cadets ever got to experience was when they entered into the ones prepared by their simulation systems.

Of course, it was well-known to all of the mech cadets that the simulated battles were nowhere comparable to the real experience.

Every mech instructor and every mech pilot consistently warned the cadets to never believe what they learned and experienced in the simulators could fully prepare them for the actual battles to come.

While Mickey Lankos tried his best to keep this lesson in mind, he found that he simply couldn't shake off the impression that he had truly traveled back in time and ended up in the middle of one of the most famous and iconic battles of the Larkinson Clan!

When Mickey had done his research on the mysterious Larkinsons, he didn't really understand the context of the Battle of Fordilla Zentra.

He became much more distracted by the scale of the battle and all of the cool and powerful mechs that appeared on the public battle footage.

Seeing them fight against each other when playing back archival footage was one thing.

Seeing the same mechs fight against each other in the best simulation system that he had ever experienced was another thing!

Almost all of Mickey's senses came alive as he immersed himself in the chaos and energy of the massive battle.

He could feel the heat radiating from the laser beams and positron beams that zipped past his body.

He could feel the crushing impacts as lancer mechs drove their long weapons into the frames of their targets.

He could feel the anger and fury of the dwarven mech pilots as their short but well-armored mechs slowly crushed their way through the defensive lines of the Larkinson mechs.

It was a pity that space did not transmit sounds, or else Mickey would have been able to hear the sounds of combat to a finer degree than ever before.

Little Five appeared just in front of his floating body and gazed at the unfolding battle as well.

"I see that you have done your research. What a diligent student! What you see is indeed a reconstruction of the Battle of Fordilla Zentra. What you are currently experiencing is a part of what every Larkinson and soldier of the former Vulcan Empire felt when they fought against each other."

"Is the current simulation a fully accurate reproduction of that battle?"

"No." Little Five immediately replied. "We have taken a few... creative liberties with the mechs and the sequence of the battle. Since this is a real battle involving mech models that are still being actively used by the Larkinson Clan, the MSTS cannot show you more of their capabilities than what is already known to the public. We fudged some of their parameters so their actual performance is quite different in reality."

Mickey didn't care about that. All of the Bright Warriors, the Ferocious Piranhas and the Valkyrie Redeemers all looked just as cool and powerful as in the footage he had recently watched!

"Is this what real mechs are like, Little Five?"

"Many high-quality and expensive simulation systems claim to be able to reproduce the sensation of fighting in an actual war, but none can come close to what you are experiencing at this very moment. This is much closer to what true combat is like. Don't you agree, cadet?"

Mickey couldn't help but nod. There was a quality to the simulated events that felt much more real to him than what he experienced in all of the other virtual battlefields.

He wasn't a scientist or an engineer so he couldn't figure out why this was the case, but as a mech pilot he instinctively felt this was indeed a more accurate reflection of what he might stumble upon in the future!

As he gazed into the distance, he noticed several distant spots of light that somehow thrummed with power.

"Are those.. expert mechs?"

"They are." Little Five grinned. "Sadly, our MSTS is not able to portray them well enough to give you a closer look at them. That is still a work-in-progress. You can examine the other mechs if you wish."

Though Mickey felt tempted to move his body closer to one of the places of the battlefield and see the human and dwarven mechs clash against each other up close, he remembered his original purpose.

"Uhm, I don't want to remain a spectator anymore. Can I start piloting a mech?"

"Why certainly! Pick any standard mech you like."

Mickey's simulated eyes blinked. "What did you say?"

Little Five's miniature face grinned as he floated around the mech cadet. "Did you think that this is just an opening cinematic that we'll breeze past once you're done admiring it? Think again! Just this once, our MSTS is granting you an opportunity to take part in this massive battle and let you wield the power of a real combat mech, with liberties of course!"

"Really?"

"Try it out for yourself, Cadet Mickey! Just look around you and pick out a mech that interests you. You can choose from both sides."

Mickey found it difficult to make a choice. There were so many awesome mechs involved in this battle that he didn't know where to begin.

"Do you want to experience what it is like to pilot a heavy melee mech that can crush other machines with a single swing of its heavy maul? Do you want to pilot one of those interesting dwarven beast mechs that are fighting at the flanks? Do you prefer to stay in the back and bombard your opponents with heavy gauss cannons instead?"

Though the dwarven mechs fielded by the Ferril Provincial Army all looked powerful in their own way, Mickey was not attracted to their style and their shapes.

He was not a dwarf, after all!

"Can I try out one of the mechs of your Larkinson Clan?"

"Why certainly! Which one has taken your fancy?"

As a younger mech cadet, Mickey had not yet formally chosen his specialization. He was still at a stage where he was learning the fundamentals in piloting both melee mechs and ranged mechs.

The Larkinson Clan fielded numerous interesting mechs, of which three of them stood out to Mickey.

The Bright Warrior model was the most prevalent on the battlefield. It came in the form of four different configurations that could fight at range and up close.

Though these mechs looked fairly strong, they were not as remarkable as the other mechs fielded by the Larkinson Army.

The Valkyrie Redeemer was the next mech model that caught the young cadet's attention.

Though its vibe was completely different from that of the Bright Warrior, the Valkyrie Redeemer nonetheless presented an interesting combat approach.

Mickey liked the thought of harassing enemies from a distance with a gun before swooping in and impaling a vulnerable opponent with a spear as soon as there was an opening!

However, the Larkinson mech that attracted him more than any of the others aside from the distant expert mechs was the heavy artillery mech that pounded the enemy mechs and ships from the rear!

The awesome gauss cannons and the searing positron cannons of the Transcendent Punisher made a profound impression on Mickey.

It wasn't just its firepower that was impressive, but also the uncanny accuracy that they demonstrated.

The Land Cracker, Ship Cracker and Mech Cracker models fielded by the elite dwarven Steel Rain Mech Regiment tried their best to keep up with their enemy counterparts, but did not entirely manage to do so. The punch and firepower of the former two dwarven artillery mechs were awe-inspiring, but their hit rates could not come close to that of the Transcendent Punisher model!

Mickey not only became attracted by the excellent performance of the Transcendent Punisher, but also figured that it was easier for a mech cadet with limited skills to pilot a heavy artillery mech.

After all, compared to the complex maneuvering that was needed to make full use of the Valkyrie Redeemers and the Ferocious Piranhas, the Transcendent Punisher merely had to stay in one place and aim its heavy armaments at the right targets!

"That one." Mickey pointed in the direction of one of the Larkinson Clan's ships. "Can I try out one of those heavy artillery mechs?"

"Excellent choice." Little Five responded. "I will transfer you in a moment. Get ready to unleash fire and fury!"

The transition happened in an instant.

Previously, Mickey was floating at a vantage point that made him feel a bit detached from the heat of the battle.

No more. This time, he truly felt as if he was interfacing with heavy artillery mech at the moment!

He could feel his body entering into a simulated cockpit that was attached to one of the heaviest mechs on the battlefield.

While the dwarves fielded even heavier and more massive mechs in this battle, the Transcendent Punisher was definitely a powerhouse of its own on the side of the Golden Skull Alliance!

Mickey barely had time to adjust to the plethora of new sensations and experiences when a nearby impact suddenly shook him and his mech from their paralysis!

It turned out that a distant dwarven Ship Cracker mech managed to slam a heavy gauss round against the surface of the front bunker cover that protected his Transcendent Punisher.

Little Five materialized inside the cockpit and placed his metal hands on his metal hips. "This is no time for you to space out and get distracted! Did your instructors not tell you that getting distracted will get you killed?"



"Ah, I'm sorry! This is all new to me. I am still trying to get my bearings in this simulation mech. I have never piloted a heavy artillery mech before, even in a simulation!"

"That won't be a problem for you." Little Five reassured the mech cadet. "The MSTS has simplified the control scheme of your Transcendent Punisher for the purposes of this introduction sequence. You don't need to pay attention to the smaller details that professional mech pilots are expected to manage. Just concentrate on the essentials that you have learned in your classes and fire away!"

As Mickey cautiously extended his mind to the simulated artillery mech, he soon figured out that it was like playing one of those virtual games. Though everything still felt a lot more real than the simulations he tried in the past, the controls had been simplified to the point where he could truly start participating in the battle without falling behind!

He soon became completely engaged in the immersive experience. Though he still needed to pay attention to managing the heat levels, energy reserves and ammunition reserves of his Transcendent Punisher, the heavy artillery mech was so generous with these factors that Mickey did not have to worry about them too much.

"This is more of a gun platform than a mech!"

Mickey soon learned that the Transcendent Punisher was all about its heavy armament.

He controlled six different cannons, of which four of them were suitable for long-ranged bombardment.

Whenever he fired the twin gauss cannons, he became incredibly satisfied when his rounds smacked into an unsuspecting dwarven mech!

Whenever he fired the twin positron cannons, he felt a special sense of satisfaction when they melted a hole through the frame of a light mech.

Surprisingly enough, Mickey found it a lot easier to land his hits at ludicrous distances. The Transcendent Punisher actively nudged his aim whenever he concentrated on a specific target.

Was this part of the simplification that Little Five talked about?

"You're wrong, Cadet Mickey." Little Five told him. "Although it feels like cheating, what you are benefiting from at the moment is a close approximation of what it is like to pilot a real Transcendent Punisher. Can you feel its glow?"

Mickey tried to feel out his mech and noticed that it felt a lot different from the War Squire he initially piloted.

"I think I do. This glow... is giving me a sense of certainty. The more I feel it out, the more I feel like I know how to punish my enemies!"

"The secret to piloting living mechs is to embrace what they tell you." Little Five revealed. "As long as you build a good relationship with any LMC mech, you can always count on them to have your back. Let us see whether you can achieve a 80 percent accuracy rate by the end of this session. Open yourself up to the Transcendent Punisher and its glow. The key to mastering this heavy artillery mech lies in recognizing that you are not alone and that your mech is actively helping you. Come on, cadet! If you can disable or destroy 30 more dwarven mechs, I'll give you an extra reward."

Mickey's eyes burned with determination. Now that he received a concrete goal, he wanted to do his best to fulfill it. With how powerful the simulated Transcendent Punisher made him feel right now, he felt confident enough to succeed!

"I can smash a whole starship with this artillery mech!"

As Mickey shot down mech after mech while learning more about the nuances of the gauss cannons and positron cannons at his disposal, Little Five continued to provide tips and advice that continually improved his effective performance.

Mickey and many other mech cadets became completely lost in the power fantasy that the MSTS had presented to young and impressionable teenagers!

Years from now, each of them would look back fondly at this moment and always associate the MSTS to this unforgettably immersive experience.

Each of them yearned to become the mech pilots that they pretended to be when they 'fought' in the Battle of Fordilla Zentra.

To them, this was not a game.

This was a preview of their future careers!

## Chapter 4075 The Rise of Hopecrest

It was surprising how a single charitable act completely changed Hopecrest Mech Academy and Centire Hill.

Ever since the Unicum Group lost a colony ship to an attack, its colonists suffered continual setbacks.

From trying to build a settlement with severe shortages in everything to going deeper into debt, the settlement of Centire Hill suffered under a cloud of depression.

Its citizens had to work harder than ever and often had to go on double shifts in order to get more work done with less.

Fresh food became scarce as the rushed and imperfect terraforming of Maylard II caused its climate to dump snow onto the region at random times.

A lot of crops couldn't survive the cold, so the settlers of Centire Hill were forced to build incubator rooms that put an even greater strain on the Unicum Group's limited amount of funding and construction supplies.

Fortunately, the colonists stocked up on an excess amount of nutrient packs since they were so cheap to acquire.

Still, eating them day in and day out became so monotonous that the meals no longer provided them with pleasure and satisfaction.

Amidst all of the shortages and sacrifices, the citizens of Centire Hill suffered even more depression when constant comparisons were made between their settlement and that of the others.

Though the L9 Alliance was nominally united, there was also an element of competition between its nine groups.

Though the other groups had been willing to donate their cast-offs to the Unicum Group in order to keep their ailing brother alive, they had not offered any further help.

Colony building was expensive! Not only were the other groups already mired in debt themselves, they also refused to sacrifice their own development in order to benefit another party!

Every group in the L9 Alliance secretly wanted to get ahead of the others and become the principal leader of Maylard II. There were too many advantages to becoming the largest, strongest and wealthiest party in an alliance.

Ever since the L9 Alliance settled down on Maylard II, a race had begun where the different groups competed to become primus inter pares!

In the ranking of the different groups, the Unicum Group unquestionably ranked at the bottom in pretty much every aspect!

This fact constantly weighed down the shoulders of the citizens of Centire Hill, compounding their depression and reducing their productivity even further.

However, much of that changed once the Larkinson Veteran Foundation made its generous donation.

No one knew why these rich and powerful Larkinsons chose to favor their colony settlement, but they did not look a gift horse in the mouth.

The mech cadets who attended Hopecrest were the first to break from their depression.

The brand-new War Squires were not only better than their awful second-hand training mechs, the amount they received from their benefactors were more than enough to give every mech cadet sufficient practice time!

No longer did the mech cadets have to wait their turn until they got an opportunity to pilot a rust bucket that was already in the process of falling apart.

The new and gleaming War Squires were not only at the beginning of their lengthy life cycles, but were also tough, resilient and easy to maintain.

The mech technicians in charge of servicing and repairing the War Squires found that it was not as costly and time-consuming to make sure they kept running.

The exterior armor plating that was usually the first to get dinged over the course of more intensive training sessions turned out to be easy to pull out and hammer back into shape.

The academy could even make its own replacement armor out of spare metals and attach it in place.

Of course, the LMC did not condone this behavior and would not provide any guarantees or assurances to any products that went off-spec.

All of this ultimately meant that the mech cadets could pilot their assigned War Squires on a regular basis!

Mickey Lankos and his other fellow cadets became completely reinvigorated as they poured their all into their studies.

This was because the mech instructors quickly noticed how much they desired to pilot the War Squires.

"Don't slack off and fall behind!" A teacher warned his class. "Physics is the foundation of reality. Learning how mass interacts with gravity at standstill and on the move may be difficult and boring to you mech jockeys, but understanding the formulas and numbers will save your life one day!"

The mech cadets sitting behind their desks still looked distracted.

"If you fail your next exam, your practice sessions with the War Squire will be cut in half."

What?!

"On the other hand, if you score high enough to rank in the top 3, then you will receive an extra hour of practice a week. Now pay attention!"

The mech instructors at Hopecrest learned how to leverage the War Squires to their advantage. By setting up numerous incentives and punishment around the use of their new training mechs, they comprehensively motivated the mech cadets into concentrating much harder on their studies!

The average performance of the mech cadets shot up by as much as twenty percent after a single semester!

The cloud of depression that hung over the entire mech academy disappeared as almost every mech cadet studied and practiced as hard as possible to maintain their access to the precious War Squires.

As the mech cadets began to enjoy their lives again, the rest of Centire Hill also became a little brighter.

Life was still hard for most of the colonists, but the joy and positivity spread by the mech cadets made everyone else's lives a little brighter.

There was hope for the future.

Mickey Lankos was one of the many mech cadets who studied earnestly in order to enjoy more time with War Squire #47.

Unfortunately, he was not that particularly intellectually gifted. He struggled to keep up during his math, physics and other theoretical classes.

There were usually ways to remedy this shortcoming, but as a member of a poor family of first-generation colonists, there was no chance that Mickey could solve his shortcomings through augmentation.

The best he could do was remain in the middle of the rankings of most of his classes.

Where he truly shone was when he had the opportunity to perform during live practice sessions and the rare but precious simulation training sessions with the new Mental Simulation Training System.

From the moment Mickey entered the cockpit of his assigned machine, he could already feel Rabarber welcoming him back.

Though Mickey had to share Rabarber with seven more mech cadets spread across different years, he had the illusion that the training mech liked him the most.

"Heya, pal. I missed you too." Mickey said as he activated the machine.

At his age, Mickey still had to learn the fundamental skills of piloting a mech. The difference from before was that his improvement rate skyrocketed when he started to train with the War Squire!

The training mech's ability to adjust its proportions to match that of their mech cadets was a huge help to someone like him. Although it was only useful during the early stages of their academy studies, this function actually saved them a lot of time.

Being able to skip most of the awkwardness in learning how to run, move and fight with a mech frame that did not match their actual bodies allowed them to spend more time on learning the more essential skills to mech piloting!

Of course, skipping this learning process also made it harder for the mech cadets to adapt to mechs with diverging shapes later on, but as long as they built up a solid foundation of piloting skills, they should easily be able to overcome this hurdle!

All in all, the mech cadets had many reasons to throw themselves into their training.

The War Squires were much more enjoyable to interface with due to their nature as living mechs..

The mechs were inherently more powerful and capable than any other training mech on Maylard II.

The mech cadets became addicted to growing stronger as their progress all accelerated by noticeable margins.

A positive feedback loop took shape as the positive results motivated the mech cadets into training harder, which subsequently caused them to attain higher scores!

Out of all of the mech cadets, few had improved as quickly or as drastically as Mickey Lankos!

While pretty much every mech cadet at Hopecrest achieved better results, Mickey practically turned into a demon when he piloted the training mech.

For example, during one training session, two War Squires tried to spar against each other with non-lethal stick weapons that looked fairly stiff but automatically softened when striking a mech.

The so-called softsticks served as adequate substitutes for mech swords as they still maintained their rigidity when striking against each other.

This made them the favorite weapons for any practice sessions involving swordsmanship and melee combat.

Thunk! Thunk! Thunk!

Dull striking sounds echoed throughout the training field as two different softsticks collided against each other.

War Squire #47 cautiously pressed forward and maintained an offensive rhythm against War Squire Squire #76.

Trey Macha, the cadet in control of Nolan, which was the colloquial name of War Squire #76, tried his best to regain the initiative, but his performance could not keep up against that of his opponent!

"Damnit, Mickey! You're embarrassing me! I've already decided to specialize in swordsmanship. How can I fall behind a cadet that specializes in marksmanship?"

Mickey grinned inside the cockpit of his trusted Rabarber.

"That's because my piloting skills and my control over my War Squire are already far ahead of yours!"

Under Mickey's smooth and deliberate control, his War Squire rotated its frame and put more force into its next horizontal strike.

Thunk!

Rabarber's softstick happened to batter Nolan's own practice weapon aside at a tricky timing!

As Nolan tried to recover as fast as possible, Rabarder moved even faster!

The circular end of the softstick pressed square against the exposed chest of Nolan.

An alarm sounded that immediately prompted both mech cadets to retreat by reflex.

"The match is over. Cadet Mickey has earned another point. With 28 points, he has reached the top of the ranking!"

It was not easy for Mickey to earn this ranking. The mech cadets had all become a lot more competitive ever since they started to train with the War Squires.

However, none of his classmates managed to sync up with their War Squires as well as Mickey.



Ever since his first session with the MSTS where he was able to pilot a simplified version of the Transcendent Punisher, Mickey deeply wanted to repeat this experience!

However, the MSTS only presented this scenario to the mech cadets only once. Every subsequent simulation session involved battle scenarios that were much more modest in scale.

After all, it took a large amount of effort and resources to simulate battles of such an immense scale. There was no need for mech cadets to fight on massive simulated battlefields all the time when they still needed to work on their individual battle skills.

Even so, the MSTS offered rewards and incentives to those that studied harder and obtained better results than anyone else, so Mickey fully invested himself in mastering the War Squire.

"How do you do it, Mickey?" Trey Macha asked as the mech cadets finally ended their practice sessions and changed out of their piloting suits. "How are you able to get so in tune with your Rabarber? My genetic aptitude is better than yours!"

It was a painful fact that Mickey's genetic aptitude was only C-, which was acceptable but not particularly noteworthy.

Mickey no longer felt bothered by his disappointing aptitude.

"Genetic aptitude isn't everything, Trey. The War Squire is easy enough for me to pilot that I can focus on practicing my fundamentals. I spent more time on that while you were getting ahead of yourself by playing with your softstick. If you can't maintain enough control over your training mech, it's too easy for me to break your balance."

Although his words sounded simple, Trey knew that Mickey's control over the War Squire had already reached an impressive level!

## Chapter 4076 Training Results

As Hopecrest Mech Academy continued to embrace their War Squires, its mech cadets started to make a name for themselves.

Whenever they competed against each other in both formal and informal competitions in a virtual practice setting, the Hopecrest cadets quickly started to win more battles.

The improvement was not that obvious at first. Even though Mickey and the rest mainly relied on the MSTS to conduct their simulation training, they could not use it to connect to conventional virtual training environments.

The cadets were all forced to hop inside their old and shabby simulator pods in order to compete in the periodic virtual exchange sessions.

It was only after a couple of months had passed that the Unicum Group finally spent a portion of its limited budget on acquiring a batch of newer simulator pods.

The group was able to save a lot of money because it no longer had to invest in new training mechs.

Once the mech cadets of Hopecrest Mech Academy were no longer handicapped in terms of technology, they started to show off their newly-acquired skills properly whenever they competed against their peers from the other mech academies!

Although most colonists on Maylard II considered these inter-academy exchanges and competitions to be playful distractions, the leaders of the L9 Alliance paid closer attention to the results.

They did not forget the fact that the Red Ocean was a dangerous frontier. Although the alliance had tried its best to hide from all of these troubles by colonizing a remote and relatively resource-poor star system, trouble might knock on its doors eventually.

If not for the fact that it took a lot of time and funding to build up their colony settlements, they would have invested even more in building up their armed forces!

While the L9 Alliance was unable to strengthen its defenses at this early stage, it did not lose perspective of the future.

The mech academies played a vital role in training strong and qualified mech cadets to serve as loyal soldiers in the future.

Previously, the alliance treated the students of Hopecrest Mech Academy as a lost cause, but the changes that recently took place caused everyone on Maylard II to change their prior impressions.

Among the nine local mech academies, Hopecrest started to rise from the bottom!

This became especially galling to the cadets who attended larger mech academies that were much better funded and equipped!

The opponents that the cadets of Hopecrest wanted to beat the most were the smug students of Clear River Mech Academy.

Unlike Centire Hill, Ulmerton was large and prosperous. The group behind this colony settlement managed to reach the Maylard System without losing any ships and cargo, so the colonists did not suffer from any critical shortages when they built up their frontier city.

Clear River enrolled almost three times more mech cadets as Hopecrest and also possessed much more comprehensive training systems, at least initially. The mech

cadets from Ulmerton were able to train and polish their skills with decent training mechs and modern simulator pods for a longer time.

Yet no matter how much cadets who attended Clear River practiced with their ordinary training mechs, they found it progressively harder to beat their rivals from Hopecrest.

Many people found this to be difficult to accept! Ulmerton was the second-largest settlement on Maylard II while Centire Hill was smaller and poorer!

Two years after Hopecrest received a donation from the Larkinson Veteran Foundation, Mickey Lankos and many of his fellow cadets had undergone drastic changes.

As Mickey became 15 years old, he grew taller and heavier. He also carried himself with a lot more confidence due to his consistently high performance during his practical lessons.

As he and his fellow Hopecrest cadets hopped into the recently-acquired simulator pods, he showed no fear or hesitation when he was assigned to duel against a Clear River cadet.

Two different virtual mechs appeared onto a simple grassy plain.

The virtual mech that Mickey had chosen to pilot for this duel was a generic second-class rifleman mech.

"I really wish I could pilot a War Squire or at least another LMC mech."

Unfortunately, he and the other mech cadets could only choose from a limited selection of basic machines that were suitable for beginner pilots. While the available choices were more powerful than training mechs, they were far behind in terms of power and comfort.

Despite these differences, Mickey did not find it troublesome to control his machine.

The sensor system of his rifleman mech already spotted his opponent.

An identical rifleman mech had already started to open fire several kilometers away!

None of the incoming laser beams struck their mark as Mickey's mech hastily bowed and hid behind a low hill.

By using the existing terrain features as cover, Mickey was able to fire back while keeping him mostly safe.

Not much happened after the initial exchange of fire. The problem was that both sides adopted the same conservative tactic, thereby achieving little else but burning and heating up a lot of dirt.

Both Mickey and the cadet from Clear River knew that they had to move closer and gain a favorable angle in order to make more progress.

That required them to expose their mechs, however! If any of them got caught in the open, then they would likely invite hits without being able to retaliate!

Usually, a standoff like this turned into a waiting game. The opposing ranged mechs should ordinarily continue to take potshots at each other while hiding behind until their energy reserves or the time limit compelled them to take risks.

Mickey did not abide by this convention.

As soon as he noticed that they had fallen into this pattern, he took the initiative to break it first by commanding his virtual mech to jump out of cover and sprint forward as fast as possible!

"What!"

The cadet from Clear River was initially surprised, then elated when his opponent's mech appeared in the open!

The Clear River mech fired its laser rifle at the exposed target, only for most of its shots to miss or only land glancing blows!

"Hold still, damnit! How are you able to juke so much while still remaining upright?!"

At their ages, the mech cadets had all become decent shots if they focused on marksmanship training, but they were not yet proficient in hitting mechs that were performing evasive maneuvers.

What frustrated the Clear River cadet the most was that Mickey's rifleman mech was making use of numerous advanced movement skills than normal.

While this made it so that the approaching rifleman mech was constantly on the verge of losing its balance and falling flat on its stomach, its pilot just so happened to make the right moves to keep it balanced!

What was even more amazing was that Mickey managed to maintain the balance of his virtual mech on rough and uneven terrain!

"I refuse to believe I can't take you down before you get close!" The opposing mech pilot roared!

Yet try as he might, he continually misjudged and missed his shots. The few hits he managed to land were mostly lucky accidents that he wasn't able to repeat on a consistent basis.

This wouldn't have happened if he was older and more practiced, but at this time his frequent misses caused him to become less stable in his attacks.

He became so consumed by his struggle to hit the mobile rifleman mech that he did not notice that the opposing machine had already come close enough to circle around the hill his rifleman mech was hiding behind!

Crack! Crack! Crack!

Laser beams seared through the air and struck the rifleman mech that was hastily lifting itself up on its feet.

Unlike the shaky and inconsistent attacks from the Clear River mech, the rifleman mech controlled by Mickey consistently struck the same target!

Three laser beams seared through the protective plating covering the left knee joint of the Clear River mech.

While the cadet in control of the distressed machine at least managed to react quickly enough by turning its frame and using its undamaged leg as a shield, that only prompted Mickey to aim his mech's rifle at the other joint!

Both virtual mechs struck each other with laser beams. Though they tried their best to remain as elusive as possible, the pilot of the Clear River mech was not only behind in movement skills, but also lost his cool due to the setbacks he suffered.

Although Mickey's rifleman mech eventually suffered a breach in its armor as a couple of laser beams penetrated a section that had already been damaged during the approach, the machine was at least able to remain standing.

The same could not be said for the Clear River mech. The machine helplessly tipped over and fell onto its back after laser beams literally melted through both of its knees.

It was not difficult to determine who had won this duel after that.

"Mickey Lankos has won. That is one additional point for Hopecrest!"

Mickey's classmates cheered but did not exhibit much surprise when they heard this result. They had long known that Mickey was fiendishly difficult to beat in ranged combat!

In the end, Hopecrest won the friendly exchange yet again when its cadets won over two-thirds of the simulated duels.

When all of the cadets emerged from the simulator pods and patted each other on their backs, Mickey was only mildly satisfied with his victory.

"This is just a game to us. There's no meaning in these fights." He muttered and shook his head.

He dreamed of participating in real battles where his life and the lives of his comrades were at stake. He continued to think fondly of how he 'fought' alongside the Larkinsons and destroyed many dwarven mechs during the Battle of Fordilla Zentra.

That was a real battle!

Even the AI-controlled opponents in the MSTS were more challenging and stimulating to fight against than the kids from the other mach academies. To Mickey, the differences in skill and effective performance became greater and greater with each passing month.

When Mickey attended Hopecrest the next day and finally received an opportunity to train with the MSTS again, he eagerly hopped inside Rabarber and initiated a connection right away.

Unlike before, the cadet did not enter a simulated room where he could choose his training scenario.

Instead, he ended up in a strange gallery that not only looked incredibly expensive but also featured rows of mechs and statues.

Each of them exuded a sensation that Mickey was quite familiar with. Their glows seemed to turn the gallery into a sacred temple that must never be profaned!

"Good morning, Cadet Mickey." Little Five's familiar electronic voice sounded.

The tiny golden mech appeared on the cadet's shoulder and sat on it like a bench.

"Hello, Little Five. What is this all about?"

"I have good news for you. Ever since you started to train with Rabarber and our MSTS, we have constantly tracked your performance and rate of improvement. While your starting point was rather low, we have personally witnessed how quickly you mastered the skills necessary to become a proficient ranged mech pilot."

"All of that is thanks to you and the other Little Spirits." Mickey gratefully stated. "I wouldn't have improved so quickly without your lessons and advice."

"You don't need to act modest, cadet. We have instructed many mech cadets since the War Squire went on sale, but your diligence and persistence is notable even when we compare you to the students who attend better mech academies. This is also why I pulled you into this gallery. You see, your overall performance has reached a threshold that makes you qualified to receive a new and promising opportunity."

"What opportunity?"

Little Five grinned as he jumped from Mickey's shoulder and floated towards the statue of the giant golden cat.

"The Larkinson Clan formally wishes to offer a special scholarship to you, Cadet Mickey. If you choose to accept our scholarship, we will bring you over to the Davute System and enroll you into our exclusive mech academy on Davute VII, the First Star Mech Academy. There, we will cover all of the expenses associated with attending it until you graduate. How is that an opportunity?"

Mickey completely froze.

#### Chapter 4077 Pre-Selection

For a moment, Mickey almost couldn't believe what he heard.

Davute was an unattainable place to him. It was not only far away from Maylard II, but also much wealthier and much nicer than he and his family could afford to live on! There was no way for a simple colonist like Mickey to reach the port system.

The First Star Mech Academy carried just as much weight to a mech cadet like Mickey.

Places like Hopecrest and Clear River both competed to become the mech academy on Maylard II, but the truth was that every institution on the planet put together could not match any of the large and resplendent schools in Davute!

Although Davute hosted many large and more renowned mech academies that were set up by organizations that trained mech pilots for centuries, the academy founded by the Larkinson Clan quickly rose up as one of the port system's rising stars.

What the new academy lacked in prestige and heritage, it made up for it with innovation and extravagant spending.

Not only did the Larkinson Clan provide its own mech academy with excellent training mechs developed by its own mech designers, but it also did not hesitate to break with convention and employ radical new training and lesson methods!



The First Star Mech Academy was probably the only institution in the Red Ocean that made the best use of War Squire and the other living training mechs of the Larkinson Clan.

The impressive academy not only utilized the base model of the War Squire like Hopecrest, but also made use of different variants.

There were War Squires that were optimized for melee combat, ranged combat, aerial combat and even spaceborn combat.

First Star also built up a large collection of modular and semi-modular equipment and components. A War Squire could be transformed into a training mech that performed similar to an actual heavy artillery mech!

Alongside that, Mickey also heard from the galactic net that the mech cadets who attended First Star also gained access to an expanded version of the Mental Training Simulation System.

If that was not enough, he also heard that the mech cadets of First Star enjoyed a rare but extremely precious privilege.

"Is it true that expert pilots sometimes drop by at First Star and instruct the cadets in person?"

"They do." Little Five smiled. "First Star occasionally invites the expert pilots in the service of the Larkinson Clan to hold guest lectures or advise a group of well-performing cadets. The higher your results in our mech academy, the more chances you will get to learn from our heroes!"

This was amazing! Not every famed and prestigious mech academy was able to invite expert pilots as guest lecturers!

All of these advantages and more steadily caused First Star to become an increasingly more popular mech academy, especially among the cadets who had the privilege to train with the War Squires!

Though Mickey had become a fan of the Larkinson Clan, he never imagined that he would have the chance to get closer to this amazing organization.

It cost too much money to attend the First Star Mech Academy! There was no way his parents could pay the expensive tuition fees.

To Mickey, attending First Star was an unattainable dream to him. He wasn't able to recover a minute after Little Five dropped this bombshell on his head.

The cute little miniature mech floated on the top of the statue of the giant Golden Cat. The Little Spirit seemed to get along extremely well with the large ornament.

Now that he thought about it, The Golden Cat statue reminded Mickey a lot of Little Gold.

"Well? What do you think about our offer?" Little Five asked as the cadet continued to remain silent. "This is not an illusion, Cadet Mickey. I may not look like an official representative of the Larkinson Clan, but one of our officials will contact you and your family later in order to confirm your choice. We are truly inviting you to study at First Star."

"Why me?" Mickey finally snapped out of his thoughts and asked. "I know I improved quickly, but I don't think I'm talented enough to earn this opportunity. Aren't scholarships supposed to go to mech cadets with higher grades of genetic aptitude?"

"Aptitude isn't everything." Little Five shook his oversized head. "We have told you this over and over. We don't prioritize genetic aptitude as much as other organizations. Those letters don't determine your worth on the battlefield. Only your actual performance matters. We care much more about other traits that are more relevant indicators of effective combat strength."

"Like what, Little Five?"

"Your diligence in training is notable. Not only that, your passion and motivation when piloting the War Squire and training with the MSTS is among the highest that we have seen among mech cadets. Your rate of improvement is impressive enough for you to be able to keep up with your future classmates at First Star and your increasing proficiency in marksmanship already shows you can become a promising ranged mech pilot after you graduate."

Mickey felt better about himself. His mech instructors often praised him for his rapid improvement, but he valued the words of Little Five more.

In fact, he learned a lot more useful lessons from Little Five than he did from any of his mech instructors!

Though he still needed to study theoretical knowledge the hard way, Little Five always seemed to offer the right practical advice. Rabarber also helped him a lot over the years.

Mickey finally convinced himself that he may be worthy enough to receive a scholarship from the Larkinson Clan.

His thoughts turned into a whirl of speculation and uncertainty.

"If I accept, what will happen to me? How soon will I arrive and how quickly can I begin my studies at First Star? Where will I live? Do I need to meet any requirements in order to keep my scholarship? Do I have any obligations? Can I still visit my family?"

"Whoa whoa whoa. Slow down, cadet! Let me answer your questions one by one."

Little Five floated down from the giant statue and conjured up a projection that showed an image of First Star's academy.

"Once you accept our scholarship and sign all of the paperwork, you are already a part of First Star. We will arrange the fastest and safest possible transit so that you can attend the classes at our campus with minimal delay. Once you arrive, you can choose to rent accommodation in Kotor City, or you can opt to reside at one of our many on-campus dormitories. The latter is completely free and that also counts for your meals."

"I won't have to pay anything?" Mickey asked.

He and his family didn't have any money. It was extremely important for him to determine whether they needed to pay any money or go into debt in order for him to pursue this scholarship opportunity.

Little Five did not fail to notice Mickey's overarching concerns. The mech softened its artificial expressions.

"Hey, you can trust our credibility, Cadet Mickey. There is no fine print and there are no traps in the contract that you will sign with us. You can check this with any lawyer, but we truly mean to help you. The only conditions that we expect you to meet is to maintain your current pace of improvement and pass all of your classes at First Star. Don't take this demand lightly as expectations are higher at your upcoming mech academy. We also expect you to maintain your integrity and abide by our honor code. We don't want cheaters and lowlives. Do you think you are up for the challenge?"

"Yes." Mickey nodded with conviction. "If that is all I need to do, then I will not make you regret your decision to give me a scholarship."

"Good, because if you fail your classes and no longer prove yourself fit to be a student at our mech academy, then you will have to pay back all of the tuition fees, accommodation fees, transportation fees and so on. We will forgive your debts if you are unable to perform for reasons outside of your control, but outside of that you are on the hook."

Despite learning about this heavy burden, Mickey did not wish to turn down this scholarship offer.

He was confident enough in his skills that he could succeed!

He just had to remind himself that he could not afford to slack off and fail. So much money was riding on this decision that he really did not want to fail and waste it all! There was no way he could earn enough money to pay back his debts for the rest of his life if he got kicked out of the mech academy of his dreams!

After making sure that Mickey understood all of the important rules and expectations, Little Five grinned.

"Great! We will inform your parents as well as Hopecrest of the good news. In the time it takes for your transit vessel to arrive in your star system, we will pull you into an accelerated training program in the MSTS to ready you to the more extensive curriculum at First Star. You especially need to catch up on your theoretical studies."

Mickey groaned.

"Hey, don't look at me like that!" Little Five looked indignant. "Knowledge is power. While you pilots don't need to know how everything works, you can avoid a lot of stupid deaths if you understand how reality works. By the way, there is one more detail that I haven't mentioned to you yet. If you manage to graduate from First Star with good results, the Larkinson Clan may extend an offer to recruit you into its ranks."

"Wait, what?! Really?!"

"Have I ever lied to you, Cadet Mickey? Our clan does not extend this offer to any ordinary graduate. You will have to meet many requirements in order to earn our approval. Your evaluation starts as soon as you begin your studies at First Star."

Mickey was completely fired up! The chance of becoming a member of the powerful and rising Larkinson Clan was too good to pass up! How could he possibly remain calm under these circumstances?! He could completely change his life and never worry about money ever again!

"Wait." He paused. "What about my parents? I don't want to abandon them, Little Five."

"Don't worry. Our clan cares about family as well. I can tell you that the salary you earn as an active serviceman of one of our mech legions is more than enough to allow your parents to live in luxury. We also permit recruits such as yourself to bring your immediate family members into our clan as members of one of our side branches. If you perform well enough as a soldier and earn enough Larkinson merits, you can choose to exchange them to promote your immediate family members to main branch members. In short, you do not have to leave your parents behind once you join our clan."

Mickey no longer had any concerns about this offer. He did not bother to read any contracts or documents.

Years of piloting Rabarber, listening to Little Five and growing stronger with the help of the MSTS had conditioned him to develop an unswerving belief in the Larkinson Clan.

Mickey did not believe that Little Five would ever steer him wrong!

Everything moved quickly after that. Time flew by as Mickey packed up his bags and waited for a trade convoy to swing by Maylard II to pick up Mickey and a couple of other local scholarship students.

After a long and boring journey through Krakatoa where Mickey tried his best to catch up to his theory classes, the trade convoy finally reached one of the brightest jewels of the middle zone.

When Mickey and hundreds of eager mech cadets finally formed up in a neat row in front of the expansive campus of his new mech academy, he and everyone else received a rare treat.

The patriarch of the Larkinson Clan personally dropped by to welcome the first batch of special scholarship students!

When Ves stood on a podium before the mech cadets that originated from every corner of Krakatoa, he couldn't help but grin at the sight.

Despite the modest number of newly-arrived cadets, each of them were bright and powerful talents in his eyes!

This was because every single scholarship student possessed spiritual potential!

The War Squires and the MSTS constantly monitored each and every mech cadet that engaged them.

As soon as any of the kids gained the potential to become an expert pilot, the MSTS instantly passed on the news to the Larkinson Clan!

Was this a violation of privacy? Most definitely. Did the Larkinsons care about this? Nope!

All Ves cared about was absorbing as many talented mech pilots into his Larkinson Army as possible. He might not have a use for them all, but he definitely did not want them to fall in the hands of his competitors.

It was fine if these high potentials flew under the Larkinson Clan's radar, but now that the MSTS confirmed that they possessed the chance to surpass the extraordinary threshold, there was no way he would let them follow their original trajectories.

"Hehehe... none of you will escape my clutches." Ves smirked as he basked in the eager expressions of the gullible mech cadets.

## Chapter 4078 Ves the Talent Scout

Offering scholarships to hidden talents was a powerful new initiative of the Larkinson Clan.

No one else paid much attention to it, but Ves valued it quite a lot. It leveraged the fact that as his commercial training mechs continued to proliferate and get sold to more and more mech academies across the Red Ocean, his work constantly got in touch with more and more mech cadets!

Every War Squire was connected to the Larkinson Clan in one way or another. Whether it was through the galactic net where it frequently downloaded software updates from or the MSTS which acted as more than just a spiritual simulation program, the training mech model constantly transmitted a wealth of personal information to the Larkinson Clan's databases.

Originally, the LMC just used all of this input to figure out how to improve its catalog of training mechs in the future.

By collecting, analyzing and tracking the flood of incoming data, the Larkinsons were able to understand the performance of their training mechs and figure out how to improve them in the future.

A change had occurred after the Quint noticed that a few notable talents that he had instructed under the friendly guise of 'Little Five' had developed spiritual potential.

When the Quint made a request to bring over these promising cadets, Ves suddenly realized the greater potential of his network of training mechs!

Ves no longer saw the War Squires as standalone products anymore. Instead, he started to treat them as the nodes of a web.

This 'web' eventually became known as the innocuous-sounding Larkinson Mech Pilot Scholarship Program.

With each War Squire that got sold, the web spread wider and wider. Any 'fly' that got caught would send a signal back to the center of the web where the Larkinson Clan could decide whether to reel in the prey.

What was especially brilliant about this scheme was that the War Squires were mostly distributed among the lower-ranking mech academies at this time.

Aside from the Larkinson-owned First Star Mech Academy, no other impressive institution had switched over yet due to many different concerns and contractual prohibitions.

Ves didn't care about that. The elite cadets who came from wealthy and powerful families were not that easy to grab.

In comparison, the mech cadets who lived on rural planets and attended shabby rural and provincial academies were often underappreciated!

Kids like Mickey Lankos completely went unnoticed due to their average or below-average genetic aptitudes and their poverty.

The former made it so that the underprivileged mech cadets did not receive any scholarships or other forms of special attention at the start.

The latter made it so that they had no good opportunities to unearth their hidden talents.

In short, no one valued these rough gems except the Larkinson Clan who possessed the ability to spot them while they were still young, desperate and easy to fool!

"These mech cadets are all young but they've already developed spiritual potential! It's a crime to leave them to their own devices!"

To a clan leader like Ves, these were prime talents that any armed organization would have loved to recruit at an early stage!

Even though it would take many years or decades for them to reach their greater potential, Ves and the Larkinson Clan were patient enough to invest in them and wait for their crops to mature.

Compared to hiring mature mech pilots, Ves much preferred to recruit younger mech cadets because it was much easier to indoctrinate them into becoming the ideal Larkinson Army soldiers.

Mech academies such as First Star turned into training centers where the mech cadets not only learned all of the skills required to fight in one of the clan's mech legions, but also received a lot of ideological education to make sure they fit the mold of an honorable and courageous Larkinson mech pilot!

Ves did not think he was doing anything wrong. In fact, it was the opposite. He truly considered his new scholarship program to be an act of charity!

After all, if a mech cadet like Mickey Lankos continued to grow up in a colonial backwater like Maylard II, it was extremely unlikely that he would ever reach his full potential.



The L9 Alliance and the Unicum Group did not have enough mechs. Only a fraction of Hopecrest's graduates would gain the opportunity to pilot a mech.

Even then, those graduates would only be piloting shabby second-hand machines that made it a lot harder for mech pilots to develop their latent potential.

The chances of expert pilots emerging from underdeveloped rural mech forces were much lower!

Therefore, the Larkinson Clan's initiative to recruit these buried talents did everyone a favor.

The clan gained a large reserve of mech cadets that had a higher chance of becoming expert pilots than normal.

The young kids not only gained a free chance to study at one of the best mech academies in Krakatoa, but also enjoyed a much easier track to become a part of a wealthy and rising power in the Red Ocean.

Perhaps the only ones who lost out in this transaction were the rural mech forces that might have missed out on obtaining a future expert pilot.

However, Ves didn't care about their plight at all. Most of these shabby organizations didn't value these hidden talents that much anyway.

After the Larkinson Clan's Education Ministry set up the entire scholarship program and started to recruit the first batch of hidden talents, Ves had no complaints about its operation.

It was quite simple to run the new scholarship program. The only requirements were that the clan had to spread a lot of living training mechs across human space and possessed a mech academy to train the incoming cadets.

Right now, the Larkinsons already satisfied both requirements. Ves did not have to do anything except wait for this initiative to bear fruit.

"The only problem is that it will probably take a generation before my clan can comprehensively grow stronger after absorbing all of these talented mech pilots."

It took at least a decade to train and prepare the mech cadets for a life in service in the Larkinson Army.

It took an indeterminate time after that for them to break through to expert candidate and become a part of the next generation of heroes of the Larkinson Clan.

Ves did not mind the wait too much.

"I don't have the mech designers to design all of the expert mechs for those potential demigods as of yet." He sighed.

That would probably change in the future when the Larkinson Clan and the Design Department had grown to a much more impressive scale than now. This was why Ves was willing to invest in the acquisition of future expert pilots so early.

It was better to have a sufficient amount of bodies at his disposal when he needed it than end up awfully short-handed twenty or thirty years later!

Not surprisingly, his wife loved this new long-term initiative.

"I need expert pilots!" Gloriana hungrily declared as she gazed at the list of names that Ves had given her. She already started to anticipate what kind of machine they wanted to pilot if they ever broke through in the future. "Each of these pilots will give me more opportunities to practice my craft and follow my ideals. There is nothing else like them and they make for good practice. If I want to reach the point where I can master masterwork mechs to the point where I can fabricate them at will, I need to work on as many worthy projects as possible!"

Gloriana had worked on so many expert mechs already that she was no longer able to get excited at the thought of designing an ordinary custom mech anymore.

Custom mechs designed with regular mech pilots in mind were too weak and limited in her eyes. They suffered from heavy budget constraints which limited the amount and scope of tech that they could integrate.

Even if they raised the budget for a custom mech design project, the limitations of the mech pilots meant that Gloriana had to forgo a lot of powerful features.

It was only when she was able to contribute to the development of a new expert mech that she improved the fastest!

Each new expert mech design project that pushed the boundaries of their existing capabilities and sought to produce new results benefited her in many different ways.

Regardless if she managed to make another masterwork mech or not, each attempt added to her design philosophy and increased her understanding of mechs by another notch.

Ves was not the only Journeyman in the Larkinson Clan who improved by leaps and bounds. His competitive wife made sure that she never fell behind!

In the years that the Larkinsons had tentatively settled on Davute VII, Gloriana contributed or led several notable expert mech design projects.

Taking inspiration from Ves and other mech designers, she successfully introduced a host of new and innovative solutions. While she wasn't able to think outside the box too often, her willingness to go outside her comfort zone and tackle new challenges was the fastest way for her to progress her design philosophy.

It started all the way back in the fifth design round. Ves, Gloriana and the others had decided to work on at least three Larkinson expert mech designs.

Aside from that, they also agreed to contribute to the various expert mech design projects started by their alliance partners, most notably the machines designed for Patriarch Reginald Cross and the Handmaidens of Death.

With so many different expert mech design projects on her plate, Gloriana was pressed for time and had to split her attention between many different priorities.

Not only that, she also had to spend enough time to raise Aurelia while also bringing her second daughter to term!

Though she encountered many challenges, she also found many clever ways to increase her productivity.

She became smarter about tackling work that she needed to do while outsourcing the rest to the expanding design teams.

She relied less on her own mind and more on the powerful first-class processors that were temporarily housed in the Genesis Lab to calculate the most optimal solutions.

She leveraged Alexandria's design network to unite the knowledge, skills and perspectives of different mech designers in order to solve complex multi-disciplinary problems.

In short, Gloriana was trying everything she could to make her schedule work, and Ves appreciated that. Each of the expert mech design projects she became involved in measurably improved in quality because of her insights, her passion, her improved affinity for mechs and most importantly her willingness to experiment.

The development of Vincent Ricklin's much-anticipated C-Man Project was the first opportunity for Gloriana to show that she was just as worthy of a mech designer as her husband.

"A brawler mech is not a conventional mech that you see every day." She told Ves one day. "It is a mech type that is underutilized due to the existence of better alternatives. This rule still applies for expert mechs as any machine at this level can gain substantially more power if they leverage the power of a high-quality weapon. Take the Amaranto and the First Sword for example. Those two expert mechs wouldn't be nearly as impressive if they lost their iconic weapons."

Ves crossed his arms. "I understand your message, but that doesn't tell us how we should tackle the C-Man Project."

"You're right, but it at least tells us that we should not settle for designing a straightforward brawler mech without any added features. The boxing glove concept is a start, but it is not enough. We need to examine the concept of a brawler mech further and determine how we can enhance it by leveraging our own strengths. We need to develop an interpretation of an expert brawler mech that can serve as a new and improved standard of Larkinson expert mechs."

That was easier said than done, but Gloriana truly aimed to break the mold with this project!

#### Chapter 4079 Gloriana's Ambition

Reinventing the concept of a brawler mech and turning the C-Man Project into a new standard of Larkinson expert mechs was not an easy task.

It was so easy for Gloriana to get comfortable with the existing pattern of Larkinson expert mechs and borrow from the existing templates.

However, this was not a good way for her to improve and progress her design philosophy.

Seeing how Ves came up with many innovative solutions and constantly expanded the strength and versatility of his unique design methods, Gloriana felt more desperate than ever to make meaningful progress.

"I can't allow Ves to advance to Senior first!"

The two both took part in the race to be the first Larkinson to advance to the rank of Senior Mech Designer.

Although it actually did not matter too much to the clan whether Ves or Gloriana promoted first, to get ahead of their spouse was still an important point of pride to them both!

Neither of them believed that they were inferior to the other. The best way to prove their high self-esteem was justified was to achieve new breakthroughs through their works!

While it was rather childish of the two of them to work so hard to exceed each other, everyone ultimately benefited from this race.

Both Ves and Gloriana gained additional motivation to work harder and achieve more results than if they worked without taking other people into consideration.

The Larkinson Clan also obtained considerably more goodies due to the competitive drive that the Miracle Couple regularly introduced.

In her attempt to make sure that she did not fall behind her husband, Gloriana put serious effort into turning the upcoming expert brawler mech into a new reference model for her work.

"The C-Man must be qualitatively better than the Minerva and our other expert mechs!"

This was an ambitious goal! Disregarding the fact that roughly half of the Larkinson expert mechs were masterworks, each of them utilized a combination of living traits, powerful resonating exotics and innovative design to stand out among their own kind.

Since Venerable Vincent wanted to upgrade his heavily-damaged B-Man custom into an expert brawler mech, Gloriana first began to examine how the new expert pilot wanted to fight.

To that end, she paid a visit to the newly-built training facilities underneath the surface of the Cat Nest.

The Larkinsons had taken to calling the extensive tunnel complex and underground facilities the Cat Burrow. This was where a lot of patrol mechs and surplus mechs of the Larkinson Clan were being stored.

The Cat Burrow also stored a lot of other supplies and could be turned into a solid underground fortress when needed.

As Gloriana and her guards entered one of the exercise halls, her expression furrowed as she caught sight of a martial spectacle.

"C'mon, Dise! Beat that pretty boy into submission!"

"You can do it, Vincent! Show these stuck-up women what a real man can do in a fight!"

Several hundred sweaty men and women gathered around a sparring ring and cheered the fighter that they favored.

If not for the excellent ventilation and scent neutralization systems in the exercise hall, Gloriana would have been flooded by a mixture of unpleasantly masculine smells!

She quickly schooled her expression as she recognized that it was not the best idea for her to show any disgust towards the Larkinson soldiers.

As she approached the right, she raised herself above the floor in order to obtain a better view of the ongoing sparring session.

Both Vincent and Dise had chosen to confront each other with their own bodies. Aside from wearing thin protective suits that were designed for occasions like these, they carried nothing else that could help them exert more power.

Both athletic expert pilots were so confident in their physical might and skills that they did not think they needed to resort to anything else to win this friendly spar!

"Vincent isn't doing so well." Gloriana quickly figured out as the man in question winced in pain as he fended off a high kick.

The two were fundamentally different warriors.

Venerable Dise possessed too many advantages over her current opponent.

She was older and vastly more experienced in battle.

She followed the brutal Swordmaiden training regime for many years in order to allow her to decapitate fearsome exobeasts in fearsome hunts!

She received genetic treatments that made her body more powerful at the cost of distancing herself from humanity.

She also advanced to expert pilot much earlier than her opponent. This meant that she had exceeded her mortal limits for quite some time, allowing her mind and physique to evolve even further.

All of these factors allowed her to gain the upper hand in the sparring session right from the beginning!

Even so, the dark-skinned Swordmaiden found it quite tricky to end the match in her favor.

The so-called pretty boy was playing hard to get as he danced and moved across the wide sparring ring!

Although it did not actually matter that much when piloting a mech, Vincent was tall and muscular. He also enjoyed some of the other advantages of a male physique.

While the disparity in mass was not that great due to Venerable Dise's unnaturally denser body, she still had to pay attention whenever her opponent made use of his physical advantages!

"Ha! Is that all, Dise? I'm barely aching!" Vincent boasted as Dise kept launching kicks.

Dise had overexerted herself without achieving too many results. Though Vincents suffered plenty of hits, he endured the pain without any complaint and finally went on the offensive when he spotted an opportunity!

This time, Dise was the one to block and evade attacks as Vincent launched a flurry of punches in her direction!

At one point, Vincent feinted another punch. Though Dise was sharp and attentive enough to notice the ploy, she failed to move her body out the way fast enough.

"Got you!"

What happened next turned into a confusing mess to Gloriana. She knew little about wrestling so she couldn't figure out whether Dise and Vincent utilized any conventional wrestling techniques.

All she witnessed was a crowd of Larkinsons shouting louder than ever as both expert pilots turned into a confusing tangle of limbs and bodies.

Eventually, the superior warrior came out ahead when she managed to lock her limbs around Vincent's body that rendered him helpless somehow!

"Argh! You're going to break my arms if you keep going like that!"

"Do you submit, Vincent?!"

"I give up! I give up! You win this time, Dise!"

Most of the men groaned in disappointment while many of the women cheered as one of their own added another victory to her belt!

Gloriana silently shook her head at the outcome. Why did someone like Vincent ever thought he could stand a chance of beating Dise in the sparring ring?

Even if he caught up to Dise in terms of technique and experience, he still would have lost the fight.

That was because he was a boy!

Well, she already knew that bravado was one of Vincent's signature traits. It made him more endearing in a way.

Once the crowd dispersed and resumed their normal training routines, Gloriana waited until Vincent hopped out of the sparring ring before approaching one of her current clients.



Vincent had already noticed the neatly-dressed mech designer and her small guard contingent. He was in no hurry to greet her, though.

He instead opted to reach out and grab a bottle of nutrient fluid. Once he sated his thirst, the expert pilot finally raised his hand in greeting.

"Yo."

Gloriana pressed her lips. Sometimes she detested the overly informal culture of the Larkinson Clan.

"Good afternoon to you too, Venerable Vincent. I have come to discuss the configuration of your upcoming expert mech with you. In order for us to design the strongest and most suitable expert brawler mech, I need your cooperation in various matters."

Vincent grinned and made a quick bow. "Ah, I heard about that from the other expert pilots. I am at your disposal, madame. What do I have to do first?"

"You can start with describing the fighting style you desire to incorporate in your expert mech. Can I assume that you desire your expert mech to adopt a similar fighting style to the one you displayed in the sparring ring?"

"Sort of." The expert pilot answered. "I should be able to do more due to the advantages of a strong mech frame. What I want is a brawler mech that is strong enough to punch really hard but also flexible enough to wrestle an opposing mech into submission."

"Just as how Venerable Dise managed to lock your body and limbs to the point where you ran out of options?"

Vincent awkwardly smiled. "Yeah. The only reason why she got the better of me this time is because she's years ahead of me. Just wait until I get up to speed with my new strength and develop my own techniques. I will definitely win the rematch!"

"Yes, yes, yes, whatever you say, Vincent. Can you demonstrate your current movements and techniques to me? I need to observe and record your physical parameters and movements once again now that you have advanced to expert pilot. The existing set of data that I have collected from you when I designed your B-Man custom mech is outdated."

The current exercise hall was a bit too busy and noisy, so Gloriana and Vincent entered an empty and available practice room where they could perform the necessary procedures.

Vincent already went through this song and dance once before so he performed efficiently.

He even called a sparring bot in order to slowly demonstrate his wrestling moves. Gloriana recognized that he actually put quite a bit of thought into them as none of his techniques were too difficult for humanoid mechs to perform on other humanoid mechs.

"You are truly committed to the idea of using your C-Man to wrestle other expert mechs into submission." Gloriana remarked.

"That's right. Don't you think it's a good idea, madame? A lot of expert mechs are so powerful that we can't beat them in a straight fight. The high-tier expert mechs we fought against in the past comes to mind. If Patriarch Reginald Cross and the Bolvos Rage aren't available to stop powerful mechs such as Venerable Orthox's Gatecrasher or Venerable Damira's Erin Tear, how are we supposed to stop these threats?"

"If sending one expert mech is not enough, then we can dispatch two expert mechs."

"I have fought in battles where the enemy's expert mechs outnumbered ours. I don't want to repeat this experience." Vincent said in a subdued tone. "What I want is the power to neutralize a high-tier expert mech. It shouldn't matter whether the enemy machine has stronger weapons or thicker armor. I'm not afraid of an expert pilot that possesses a lot more resonance strength than me. As long as my C-Man is able to get past the enemy's guard and lock it up, it won't be able to fire its guns or bring any of its other handheld weapons to bear against my machine!"

The approach sounded good, but humanoid mechs were not completely equivalent to human bodies.

It was a lot more complicated to design a viable mech that was good at wrestling!

If Gloriana did not get all of the technical details right, then the C-Man would likely suffer considerable damage each time it approached and exerted its force against another machine!

Aside from that, no expert mech was truly harmless or helpless. Every expert mech possessed true resonance which comprehensively amplified its performance while also granting it with new abilities!

In order to make the C-Man work, it had to be strong enough to resist and overcome an enemy expert mech's resonance shield and other potent resonance abilities.

Should she ask Ves to include an element of Lufa in the C-Man?

She shook her head. Lufa's personality deviated far too much from Vincent's personality. The expert pilot would become an empty husk if he was robbed of his bravado!

Chapter 4080 A Smarter Mech

"Mama!"

Aurelia tugged at Gloriana's lab coat as she leaned in front of her terminal in the Genesis Lab.

The mech designer turned away from her latest series of sketches and directed her attention to her daughter.

"Do you want another hug, baby?"

"Look, mama! Design!"

Aurelia presented an awful-looking feline figure that she had shaped and molded with her hands.

Even though the abomination of a 'mech' violated every rule of mech design that Gloriana had ingrained in her mind, the mother did not utter any admonishments.

She expected more from the mech designers in the employ of the Larkinson Clan because they invested many years to become professionals.

In contrast to the Apprentices and Journeymen she worked with on a daily basis, her daughter was only a little over a year old. How could Aurelia possibly come close to displaying the skill of her parents?

She was just a baby!

"Is this your first mech design? Let me take a look.

Gloriana directed a loving gaze at Aurelia before she picked up the molded figurine. It was made out of a form of smart metal that mimicked the properties of clay but came with a lot of safety features to make it safe for small children.

For example, the smart metal would automatically slip out of Aurelia's grasp if she tried to ingest it or throw it onto Clixie or something.

Ever since Ves came back and gifted Aurelia this toy, she had become completely fascinated with it. While her control over her limbs was not good enough for her to work with precision, their daughter did not care about that at all as she did what every impressionable kid would do in this situation.

She imitated her parents!

From the moment she was born, Aurelia spent most of her time alongside her mother and father as they worked on various mech designs.

No matter whether she was sleeping, eating, playing or calling for attention, Aurelia had become immersed in the world of mech design from the start of her life.

In fact, Gloriana did not want to expose her daughter to mechs so much. Aurelia was meant to become the next leader of the Larkinson Clan. It would be a waste of her designer baby pedigree if she chose to become a mech designer!

Perhaps the young mother should look into finding playmates for Aurelia. The problem with that was that her daughter was too much of a genius compared to other babies at her age. Not a lot of children were cognizant enough to keep her brilliant daughter company!

"Your 'mech' looks quite cute, Aurelia. Is this your vision of a ferocious tiger mech?"

Aurelia eagerly nodded.

"Did you model it after another cat?"

"Clixie!"

"Miaow!"

Clixie ran up and preened proudly at Aurelia's side.

Gloriana could clearly see that Aurelia's 'tiger mech design' was simply a rudimentary copy of Clixie. The proportions of actual tiger mechs were still different.

"How will it fight in battle?"

"Pounce! My mech will pounce! Just like how Lucky pounces on Clixie!"

"Oh? Can you show me, my dear?"

"Here!"

When Aurelia took back her tiger mech, she made a cute noise and made it pounce an imaginary enemy.

Gloriana indulged her baby's preoccupation a bit more before Aurelia decided she wanted to design a knight mech next. The little girl left her 'tiger mech design' with her mother and raced off to her stash of unused smart metal.

As Aurelia started to shape a big shield with her cute little hands, Gloriana turned back to her terminal and studied a more serious mech design.

She had sketched several variations of the C-Man Project already but couldn't lock in her choice.

Each version of the C-Man possessed slightly different physical properties. Some of the draft designs were tougher. Others were more capable of launching powerful punches. A few exhibited exceptional flexibility that allowed the frames to perform more elaborate wrestling techniques.

She wasn't quite able to nail a mech concept that possessed the advantages of every version.

"What am I doing?"

If she was approaching this design project from an ordinary angle, then she would have settled on a single choice and accepted the tradeoffs that came with it. As a mech designer, it was impossible for her to forget that her craft was all about compromises.

Her expression soured. "What if I don't want to settle for the least-bad solution this time? What if I want to have it all for once?"

She continued to brainstorm for solutions as she tried to come up with a draft design that could simultaneously make her mech tough, strong and flexible whenever needed.

Her initial idea was to borrow a page from the Chiron mech design and rely on physical transformation systems to dynamically alter the C-Man's configuration in the field.

She shook her head. "This is not an acceptable choice for a melee mech that is meant to endure frequent physical stresses."

Adding additional mechanical systems to a mech that would undoubtedly get smacked around in every battle was a recipe for disaster!

Just a small proportion of these complex and finicky systems needed to go wrong in order for the C-Man to suffer from a critical malfunction! Gloriana did not want Venerable Vincent to die because her work failed him in a moment where he had to rely on it the most!

What else could she choose?

Gloriana looked around and inadvertently landed her gaze on Aurelia's 'tiger mech'.

The main reason why a little girl like her daughter was able to make it in the first place was due to the helpful properties of the smart metal that a producer had turned into a toy!

Gloriana suddenly came up with an interesting idea.

"What if I base the C-Man around nanotechnology?"

She could already imagine the infinite possibilities of doing so. By relying on a smart metal system to form the main structure of her next expert mech, she could develop a powerful melee machine that did not have to remain stuck with the strengths and constraints of a single configuration!

If the C-Man wanted to punch harder, it could thicken its torso and its arm and exert more power through its upper limbs.

If the C-Man was under heavy fire, it could thicken its exterior in the direction it was attacked.

If the C-Man needed to wrestle or subdue an opposing expert mech, it could take on a limber shape or just 'melt' a portion of its body to dig into the cracks of an exposed enemy mech!

Gloriana realized that this could definitely give the C-Man the edge it needed to gain superiority in battle!

"It will entail a significant change in identity. Vincent also needs to learn how to harness the properties of smart metal mechs."

There were other downsides to utilizing smart metal as the base of a mech.

Smart metal systems such as ASMAS were extremely expensive. A mech made out of ASMAS was at least ten times and sometimes more than a hundred times more expensive than a mech with equivalent properties!

Although smart metal mechs possessed a lot of additional versatility, it was extremely difficult to come up with a design that justified the extravagant spending.

"This is even more concerning for a expert mech!"

It took a lot more money to design a machine that could keep up with the power level of an expert mech. Ordinary nanomachines such as the product that Aurelia used to design her 'mechs' would fall apart after getting hit by a single sneeze from an expert mech!

"If I go through with this decision, our clan needs to exchange a considerable batch of phasewater to afford a smart metal system that is optimized for expert mechs."

Not only that, but a mech that was heavily reliant on nanotechnology became vulnerable to new forms of attacks.

The chief danger of any smart metal mech or device was the constant fear that the miniscule bots that made up this programmable material could get hacked!

Once an enemy forcibly gained control over the nanomachines, it could easily be subverted and turned against its own side!

Gloriana furrowed her brows as she continued to hold Aurelia's tiger mech. There were many good reasons why she needed to abandon her current train of thought. An expert mech made out of smart metal was an expensive investment that might not pay off in the end.

If she wanted to play it safe, then she would have listened to her better sense and reorient her thoughts towards more realistic design solutions.

However, when she imagined how her husband would behave in this situation, she had no doubt that he would go for the crazy and stupid option in order to pursue a more ambitious goal!

"Maybe I need to make bolder decisions as well."

A smart metal mech came with so many disadvantages that they hindered the potential of a mech that could dynamically change shape and adapt its form in mid-battle.

Yet if Gloriana was able to work on these weaknesses and mitigated them one by one, then turning the C-Man into a viable smart metal mech became a lot more viable!

She already started to develop a few ideas on how she or her husband could tackle the many problems associated with designing a smart metal mech.

"I have to pursue this idea!" Gloriana hungrily claimed. "I can unlock so many new possibilities if I succeed in harnessing this technology!"

She spent the remaining hours of her design session on entertaining Aurelia and performing research on smart metal expert mechs.

Compared to normal smart metal mechs, their expert mech counterparts possessed significant advantages that somewhat lessened their vulnerabilities.

However, the cost was exorbitant. There was no way that the Design Department's discretionary spending budget could cover for any of the extravagant smart metal systems that were for sale in the Red Ocean!

When she met with Ves after she ended shift, she immediately presented her proposal and ideas to him. Her husband took on an odd and bewildered expression when he heard she wanted to turn the C-Man into a smart metal mech of all possibilities.



"I don't see how the concept of the C-Man is compatible with smart metal technology." Ves voiced his initial opinion. "The C-Man is the definition of a hard and rigid mech. It is a macho mech that needs to remain strong and hard when put under high pressure situations. Smart metal mechs have a tendency to collapse and deflate in the situations where we most need it to perform."

He had a good point. A simple plate made of solid metal was almost always tougher and more resistant than a plate made out of lots of tiny interlocking machines.

"You are not wrong, Ves, but that is not a reason to dismiss this technology entirely. We can work on this issue. Aren't we good at innovation? We can leverage our specialties to develop new solutions that can lessen this problem! Think about it. Wouldn't a living mech be a lot more impressive if it could exert more control over its own form? Venerable Vincent doesn't even need to make any of the complex calculations needed to dynamically reconfigure the shape of his expert mech. The C-Man could decide for itself if it wants to grow a tail or lengthen one of its limbs!"

"..."

Her husband fell silent for a time.

In truth, Ves felt as if he was experiencing a moment of déjà vu.

Hadn't he already implemented this concept in his Devil Tiger design? Ves had already achieved a part of what Gloriana wanted to realize with her new smart metal expert mech concept!

"Well? Do you agree that this is promising enough to spend more time on it or not? I think my latest idea is highly promising, Ves. If you can combine the strengths of living mechs with smart metal technology, I can work on developing new solutions that can address some of the other problems associated with smart metal mechs! If we succeed, we can introduce a brand-new expert mech that is filled with ground-breaking advancements! The gains we can make from this project will more than compensate for its cost!"