

## Mech 4551

### Chapter 4551 Blood Assurances

"Yaaay! I'm gonna be a swordmaster! I'm gonna be a swordmaster! I'm gonna be a swordmaster!"

Andraste happily ran around the sparring ring while expressing her delight at the latest development.

Her new teacher had finally agreed to train her in traditional swordsmanship!

Even though Ketis quickly added that the initial years of training will only consist of light and basic foundational exercises, Andraste didn't care about the particulars.

All she cared about was the fact that she was finally beginning her training to become a real warrior, just like Cristine Oxtin of the Terra Guardians!

While the energetic little kid continued to run around in her cute little training suit, her concerned father and her resigned teacher held a more serious discussion.

"What were you thinking about giving companion spirits to infants?!" Ketis hissed. "Don't you realize how much of a danger your daughter poses to herself and others?"

Ves grimaced at the thought. "Andraste should be smart enough to know that Yaika's new spiritual attribute is not a toy. I am also confident that she has developed a resistance towards this energy. She is one of the few people that is fully immune to a death energy wave attack. That is pretty impressive in my book."

"That makes it even worse, Ves! If she plays around with her companion spirit's powers and doesn't perceive any threat from them, she can direct her power towards other children without too much thought."

That indeed sounded like a serious possibility.

"I will do my best to teach her to be more responsible with her companion spirit, but I can't do it alone." Ves said. "I know a lot about harnessing energies for creation, but I am not that good at figuring out efficient methods to kill with them. As much as I want my daughter to grow up without ever needing to kill, she will be better off if she knows how to defend herself."

Ketis nodded in agreement. "I can take care of all of that and more. I was serious about her potential to develop a new sword style. I did it for myself after you gave me Sharpie. She can become an amazing swordmaster or expert pilot one day. Her attitude can use a lot of work, but all of her other parameters are excellent. She is the most talented little girl that I have ever met, and she is pretty much a blank slate with regards to combat. Perhaps starting off her training early is not that big of a deal. She shouldn't train too often, though."

"How frequently will you train her? Will you supervise her training personally or will you leave it to your subordinates?"

"Hm." Ketis thought for a moment. "She can come here twice a week. As you know, I am a busy mech designer, so I won't be able to supervise her training every time. I will make sure to assign a capable Swordmaiden or Heavensworder to do the job in my stead. Your kid will be in good hands, you can make sure of that. I might even bring in Kirian as well. My son isn't as strong as Andraste, but it would be good for both of our children to keep each other company during the sessions."

"That's a good idea."

They settled a few details. Both of them agreed that Andraste needed training, though they weren't entirely sure about the details. Ketis would have to figure out an appropriate training plan later.

When Ves turned his attention back to his daughter, he found that she had approached a woman who had stood quietly at the side all this time.

"Are you sad, auntie Jannzi?"

"No. I am not."

"You lie! You were much happier before!"

Venerable Jannzi sighed. "That is true, but that does not mean I am 'sad'. There are other emotions that are much more difficult to explain to you. My life can be better, but I am content in the fact that I am moving forward again."

"Ohhh..."

Ves walked up to his daughter. "Don't bother an expert pilot when she is in an emotional mood, Andraste. It's rude and may even be dangerous."

"But she's sad, papa."

"I'm not sad!" Jannzi defended herself.

Andraste giggled in response. "Hihihi! You were sad before, but not anymore."

"You naughty girl." Ves ruffled his daughter's hair, causing her to giggle even more.

Jannzi smiled at the sight.

"So, Jannzi. You've decided to train with Ketis as well?"

The expert pilot nodded as she had nothing to hide. "That is correct. I don't have a mech for me to pilot, but that doesn't mean I should stop training entirely. I don't want to pilot any other mech or virtual mech, so the next best alternative is to rebuild my fundamental fighting skills. I have only attended a couple of training sessions so far but I am already beginning to see the benefits. Once you complete my new expert mech, I will be able to fight a lot more effectively than before."

Ves was happy that Jannzi was showing initiative again. He hated it when his assets were going to waste because they were underutilized.

Expert pilots were extremely powerful but also extremely demanding combat assets. They not only needed their own personalized expert mechs to show their value, but also demanded a lot of maintenance as they could easily regress if they no longer exercised their current skills.

"I have a question about the Dullahan Project." Jannzi spoke. "You promised to figure out a way to integrate actual human blood into the design of my future expert mech. How much progress have you made up until this point?"

"I'm almost done with a rough implementation. The design process is still at an early stage, so I can add and remove elements without much consequence. I still need to refine the new circulatory system and test how to best integrate it into the mechanical side of your future expert space knight. I don't want the blood to do nothing except run a circuit around the internal architecture of the machine. I might have to add additional organic components to the design in order to make it worthwhile."

"I do not fully understand why it is even necessary to add this in the first place." Jannzi furrowed her brows. "I kept thinking back on the vague and confusing descriptions you have given me, but I still do not understand how it works."

Ves patted his chest with his palm. "That's my problem, not yours. It is the mech designer's job to puzzle over all of the technical issues. Just trust me when I say that you will not regret this addition. The new Blood Pact that you can form with the successor to your Shield of Samar will bind the two of you together at a level that I can scarcely imagine."

"Uh huh. Will you test this new Blood Pact mechanism on another mech model before you potentially ruin my second expert mech forever?"

"Relax, Jannzi. I am already working on putting together a biomech that will serve as a proof of concept for my new Empowered Blood Sharing System. As long as no one suffers any accidents while piloting my experimental biomechs, I will have all of the confirmation I need to roll this function out to other mech designs."

Venerable Jannzi furrowed her brows. "Huh. Last I heard, you were principally opposed to biomechs. You shouldn't even know how to design a mech made out of flesh and bone in the first place."

"People can change their minds, you know." Ves defended himself. "Besides, designing biomechs is not as difficult as you think. I just had to learn more subjects than usual. This was why it took so long before I became confident enough to design my first proper biomech. I have always known that organic parts work particularly well with my design philosophy. This is just the natural progression of my work."

The female expert pilot did not look convinced. "If the Titan-5 Project is an indicator of what you can accomplish by applying your specialty to organic mechs, then maybe I am better off with piloting a fully metallic machine."

"The Titan-5 Project is not a representative example of my biomechs! It is a deliberate experiment to seek the limits of the amount of primal aggression a living bioconstruct can accumulate. I will make sure to impose strict limits onto my future biomechs so that they will never come close to reaching that level of hostility."

"Mmmhmmm."

Ves sighed. "Even if things go wrong, there are always backup options. The Dullahan Project is not strictly a cyborg mech. At most, it will be 95 percent mechanical and only 5 percent organic. If my implementation of the Empowered Blood Sharing System in your expert mech has become too

untenable to fix, then I will simply remove the organic components and fill up the spaces with more conventional parts. Neither iterations of your expert mech will have any wasted space. Does that ease your concerns?"

"That is much better news." Jannzi finally smiled. "By all rights, I shouldn't agree to your decision to insert experimental technology into my expert mech, but... you often find a way to make your crazy ideas work. A part of me is excited to pilot the first expert mech that incorporates this promising new feature."

They talked about a few other properties about her Dullahan Project. Ves had made much more progress on the complicated design than everyone thought, which meant that he had reached a stage in the design process where he needed to gather more input from the end user.

"Will you roll out this new blood system to our other expert mechs if it turns out that it has lived up to its potential with my upcoming expert mech?" Jannzi curiously asked.

"I... am not so sure about that." Ves reluctantly answered.

"Why? Are there any risks or complications to them that you have yet to disclose?"

Ves hesitated a bit longer before he decided to come clean.

"Theoretically, the moment a mech pilot develops a Blood Pact with a mech, the two become bound on a deep and possibly permanent level. The implication here is that the mech pilot will essentially be locked into piloting a single machine for the rest of his life. I'm not sure about any of this, mind you, so don't assume that these are all facts. I am just describing one of the more adverse possibilities here. Even so, a mech pilot will only be able to fight at his best when he is paired with his bound machine. No other mech pilot should be

able to control it once it is locked into a Pact, so that is an additional restriction."

Venerable Jannzi clearly wasn't bothered by this restriction. She had bound herself to the Shield of Samar before Ves invented this Blood Pact.

Besides, Ves possessed the capability to reinvent or rebirth an existing mech, so it was not as if Jannzi would lock herself into a mech that could never be altered over time.

"I can see why several of our expert pilots might shy away from this commitment." Jannzi spoke. "The only one who will embrace your Blood Pact without hesitation is Venerable Vincent Ricklin. He's a bit of a fool but his love and adoration to his C-Man is sincere and authentic."

Ves was surprised that she left out a few potential candidates.

"I would think that all of our expert pilots might embrace the benefits of permanently binding themselves to their current expert mechs. My clan and I have always made sure to maintain their development and upgrade them to new and modern specifications whenever the differences have grown big enough. Our pilots don't have to switch over to a new expert mech every generation because the mech designers are too lazy to revisit one of their existing works."

"That is true. It is one of the best parts about working for the Larkinson Clan. The main reason why the other expert pilots are reluctant to follow suit is the possibility that they might lose their machines entirely. Don't forget that I came close to losing my Sammie entirely. If not for the fact that the Skorpcion Kommando's acid failed to melt away the head of my expert mech, there would be nothing left for you to embark on the Dullahan Project!"

"That's not strictly true." Ves smirked. "As long as you are able to get to safety with your life intact, then you will most assuredly retain your ejected cockpit."

That is one of the most integral parts of your expert mech. It would be a lot harder to design a successor to your Shield of Samar with less intact salvage, but I would still be able to cobble up a decent work. As far as I am concerned, Venerable Joshua and all of our other expert pilots don't need to be afraid. In fact, if my more wilder theories are correct, I don't even need an intact cockpit to reconstruct their bonded machines..."

It was too premature for Ves to make any further claims. His biggest priority at the moment was to complete his revised Blood Knight Project so that he could test his assumptions in reality!

#### Chapter 4552 More Conflicts

Calabast stood in front of a projected map that depicted the border region between the Krakatoa Middle Zone and the Zelmar Upper Zone.

The map conveyed a lot of data. Not only did it show off the relative position of different star systems, they were also accompanied by symbols and labels that showed the events that took place in those locations.

There weren't many reliable sources of intelligence in this chaotic area, but the Black Cats were more than up to the tasks. The large number of analysts, experts and investigators that Calabast had recruited over the years were truly doing their best to prove they had been worth all of the investment.

As Ves employed multiple instances of his attention to absorb and process the huge amount of information conveyed by the map, he felt that he hadn't wasted all of the MTA credits he poured into the Black Cats.

Sure, the Larkinson Clan spent a disproportionate share of its budget on the Black Cats and other intelligence services, but he knew that this was pretty much the only way to acquire a reasonably competent and reliable spy agency within a decade.



Trying to take it slow and prioritizing savings over results would only land him in trouble. He could point to many incidents in the past where stumbling blindly into hotspots had resulted in close shaves and heartstopping incidents.

As Ves rapidly processed all of the intelligence processed by the Black Cats, a separate thread of attention took a step back and looked at the situation on a more galactic scale.

"The frequency of combat has increased by at least 15 times over the last two months." He remarked. "What I find curious is that it hasn't shown any signs of slowing down. The trend is continuing to rise at a faster rate. The pioneers can't blame it on the aliens either. The vast majority of open conflict in the border region are intrahuman battles."

Calabast nodded in agreement. "People are starting to get antsy, Ves. Not a sign of Lord Pearian Yorul-Tavik has been found so far. The only clues that the pioneers who descended in this area have managed to uncover are sporadic battle wreckage that signify the passing of an increasingly less impressive first-class pioneering fleet. It doesn't help that not all of the wreckage can be attributed by Lord Pearian's doomed attempt to stride across the Red Ocean like those explorers from those cliché adventure dramas."

"Well, that certainly isn't stopping all of these pioneers from beating each other up. New arrivals are constantly pouring in from multiple directions, which will increase the concentration of pioneering forces in this border region even further. That will inevitably lead to more scuffles between different forces."

The Golden Skull Alliance had already noticed this to an extent. Even though the expeditionary fleet had already traveled fairly deep into the border region, it was not strange to enter a star system that was already occupied by one or multiple pioneering fleets.

The good news was that most of them were located at least multiple light-hours away. They had reached this destination from a different direction and star system, which meant they were unlikely to drop right on top of the Golden Skull Alliance and vice versa.

Back in the old galaxy, this meant that battle was extremely unlikely to erupt so long as one side did not wish to fight.

It took a lot of time for one fleet to intercept another fleet in the same star system. No matter how fast the former traveled, their sub-light propulsion systems were unable to traverse faster than the speed of light.

Light was information. The emissions released by the fast approach of an entire fleet was like igniting a bonfire in the dark.

The target of this aggressive approach would most definitely pick up on these emissions and figure out that they were about to get into trouble.

The potential victim therefore had plenty of time to turn around and flee to a Lagrange point or the edge of the outer system where they could safely depart the star system with the help of their FTL drives.

The strengths and limitations of conventional faster-than-light drives pretty much determined the rules and frequency of combat in the Milky Way.

Pitched battles were relatively rare unless an aggressor collected enough information about a target and set up an ambush beforehand.

The other instances where pitched battles took place was where the defending side was anchored to a single site, for example a planet or a space station.

Those rules no longer applied in the Red Ocean.

As the annotated map clearly showed, the amount of battles that took place in this part of the new frontier vastly exceeded the amount of combat that would have erupted in any part of the old galaxy!

Even though Ves had already acclimated to the Red Ocean for over half a decade, he still found it difficult to reorient himself to this new and much more violent reality.

The existence of warp drives and superdrives no longer guaranteed safety to fleets in space.

The ability to travel faster than the speed of light in realspace meant that looking at emissions no longer provided sufficient advance warning!

Just like how thunder lags behind lightning, the actual approach of a threatening fleet could precede the arrival of its emissions!

All of this meant that the expeditionary fleet constantly had to maintain a higher-than-average state of readiness. Ambushes coming out of nowhere was always a small but distinct possibility.

The only reliable way to defend against such opportunistic assaults was to build up as much deterrence as possible.

"It's too bad the Third Fleet of the Adelaide Mercenary Company said goodbye to us." Ves sighed. "We formed a much greater deterrence against other pioneering fleets when we had twice as much mechs, expert mechs and ace mechs at our disposal."

Calabast chuckled as she scratched Lucky's ears. The lazy cat had jumped into her arms as usual.

"The security risks of traveling in close proximity to a fleet that is almost on par with ours are too great. I am much more at ease now that those mercenaries have finally taken their upgraded equipment and left our side. We don't have

the capabilities to learn whether the Adelaides secretly contacted their buddies and had them converge upon our coordinates in order to tear us down."

Ves grimaced at the possibility. He could see on the map that incidents like this comprised at least 10 percent of the battles that had erupted in the border region. Friends could turn into enemies within a heartbeat as long as there was any sign of vulnerability.

Trust was in awfully short supply in the Red Ocean.

"I understand. For what it is worth, I agree that it is probably for the best, especially now that we have found a more solid trace of the mission objective."

His lips curled into a smirk. With the Palace of Shame behind it, the expeditionary fleet had finally traveled deep enough for Ylvaine to determine the direction that could bring him closer to the missing scion of the Yorul-Tavik Clan.

Calabast looked a little more skeptical. "For all of the intelligence at my disposal, I have found very few clues that suggest that Lord Pearian is hiding in the star systems that are located in this direction. I don't mean to question the accuracy of a prophecy made by one of your so-called design spirits, but are you sure it is reliable? I have no way to tell as I am completely in the dark about the capabilities of these 'spiritual entities'."

Though Calabast was a highly competent spymaster that Ves was lucky to have on his staff, her lack of understanding of the more mystical and esoteric side of reality was becoming a growing hindrance.

Her lack of spiritual potential meant that Ves couldn't employ an easy method to activate her spirituality and help her develop at least a rudimentary awareness of the forces that he contended with for many years.

For now, Calabast would have to wait if she wanted an upgrade. The most promising method to impart spiritual potential to mundane individuals was the Empowered Blood Sharing System, and that only applied to mech pilots for the time being.

Ves still needed to complete his revision of the Blood Knight Project and instruct the Larkinson Biotech Institute to grow a batch of experimental biomechs to verify the viability of the Blood Pact.

So long as the Blood Pact worked as advertised, Ves would immediately be able to proceed with follow-up experiments!

"How long will it take for our fleet to reach the coordinates where Lord Pearian is presumably hiding?"

"We are not certain about that." Calabast said as Lucky meowed for more attention. She obliged and stroked his slender metal back. "Ylvaine only gave us a rather imprecise direction. The lack of precision meant that we must consider all of the star systems in an expanding cone in front of our ships as potential destinations. Depending on how many light-years you are willing to consider, we are easily talking about hundreds if not thousands of star systems."

Many of them were rather obscure and worthless, but those tended to be the best hiding places.

Ves frowned deeper as the projected map changed by visualizing the expanding cone.

"If Ylvaine can only determine a direction but not the distance, then we can assume that Lord Pearian is not too close to us. We can dismiss the nearest star systems. That still leaves us with a lot of remaining possibilities, but I don't think the man is too far from us either. Ylvaine would have a much harder time picking him up if that was the case."

The narrow front and the wide back of the cone disappeared at Calabast's direction. This left the two with 'only' a couple of hundred star systems that were reasonably clustered together.

"I guess the best way to proceed forward is to travel through the center of this shortened cone and ask for course corrections from Ylvaine." Ves surmised.

The spymaster nodded. "Those are our thoughts as well. We estimate that it will take two to four weeks to arrive in the right star system. It may take longer if there are any complications."

"Such as...?"

"Friction with other pioneering fleets, for example." Calabast said. "Even though the concentration of other forces within this cone is lower than in the periphery of the border region, the odds of having company in the same star system is fairly high. If we are particularly unlucky, then we might not be able to rescue Lord Pearian Yorul-Tavik without the presence of a third party."

"Ugh. I can see how that can be troublesome. We'll figure out a solution if that scenario comes to pass. We can always hope the destination star system will be empty."

Calabast's flat look showed how confident she was that this would happen.

"Is there other news I should take note of?" Ves asked.

"Yes. There is one important development that you should take into account." Calabast waved her arm at the far side of the cone. "The Zelmar Upper Zone is rather close if we continue to go forward. While the chances are small, we may encounter a first-class pioneering fleet or two. Not all of them will contain as many ships as ours, but even a small gathering of ships and mechs can pose a life-threatening danger to our troops."

Ves dismissively shrugged. "It should be fine. The Big Two heavily cracks down on first-raters dropping by the middle zones in order to bully the weak. Besides, my relationship with the MTA should deter these strangers from starting any trouble."

"And if that is not enough?"

"Well, we can only fight hard, I guess." Ves morosely said. "The casualties will inevitably be great, but we will take down as many bastards with us as we can. Between our battle formations, our blessed weapons and the Mars, we might even have a shot of winning the battle."

Although the disparity between the Golden Skull Alliance and a genuine first-class mech force was still great, Ves no longer harbored as much fear towards the latter!

With each new innovation, Ves was steadily closing the gap between himself and the first-raters.

Though it would take many more years before he and his clan could reach this impressive level, it was no longer as unattainable as before!

#### **Chapter 4553 Increased Productivity**

Life in the expeditionary fleet returned to a routine.

The aftermath of the Battle of the Boryan Belt had already passed. Many damaged mechs had been restored to satisfactory condition while replacement mechs already made up for the ones that got destroyed.

The mech pilots that got killed by the alien pirates were much more painful to replace, but life had to go on. The Larkinson Army maintained an ample reserve of replacements. Enough of them seamlessly slotted into the understrength mech units.

It would probably take months for the different mech squads and mech companies to regain their high degree of coordination and synergy.

No one was sure whether another battle would erupt before the mech pilots could reach that level again, but no one was willing to bet that they would be left alone.

Either an enemy would bump into them and force them into a fight, or their clan patriarch would proactively lead them into a preventable battle.

That was how it always went, and everyone was pretty much used to it. Even their alliance partners pretty much took this for granted.

Everything was okay so long as the Golden Skull Alliance kept winning!

Ves could literally lead them all into the jaws of a phase whale and still maintain everyone's loyalty!

As the fleet slowly moved towards the direction where Lord Pearian Yorul-Tavik might be found, the different clansmen were doing their best to prepare for what the future might bring.

The mech pilots all focused on training while the mech designers attended to their various duties.

Ves reviewed the ongoing design projects at this time. He quietly scanned through the design logs and status reports in order to get up to speed with the latest developments.

"Hm, we are catching up to our original schedule again. That's good. The previous operation has delayed us by several weeks, but I am glad that the rewards we have obtained from the previous battle isn't slowing us down."

His wife nodded. She sat next to him as she held Marvaine in her arms. "We have a lot more manpower than before. As much as we wish to spend our time on studying all of the alien technology that we have salvaged from the previous battle, there are not enough mech designers who can perform our



design work in our stead. It is much better to leave the technical analyses to other scientists and engineers and wait for them to draw their conclusions."

This was the approach that the Larkinsons had chosen, and it was working out to an extent.

Ves actually preferred to study all of the fascinating alien tech himself. He had gone on a day-long tour in fact so that he could see all of the fascinating warship and starfighter remnants up close.

He was hoping that there might be tech or material among the wreckage that were spiritually reactive.

He hadn't found anything significant, much to his disappointment. The natives of the Red Ocean did not have any interest in pursuing a purely spiritual path of goodhood, unlike the races back in the Milky Way.

It was all about phasewater to them. This worked out well enough for the indigenous alien races, but it was not that great to Ves.

Although Ves had become initiated into the ways of phasewater after his recent sublimation, he was still a spiritual engineer.

If he wanted to create more permanent works that combined the power of spirituality with more material products, then he needed to get his hands on more spiritually reactive materials.

The good news was that everything he had learned as of late introduced him to numerous different ways he could solve this problem.

From hunting down different whale species to growing organic metals that were baptized with enriched blood, Ves came up with all manner of potential solutions.

He had already tasked the Larkinson Biotech Institute and T Institute in exploring the more viable ones. Hopefully they would soon start their efforts to see whether his ideas had any merit.

For now, Ves needed to focus most of his attention on his design projects.

His massive upgrade to his cognitive functions had drastically accelerated his progress. So much so that he was making at least three times as much progress on a slower day and five times as much progress on a better day!

The drastic improvement in productivity made life much more convenient for Ves, but it also drew the ire of a certain jealous wife.

Though Gloriana did her best to remain composed, Ves could easily sense her growing feelings of jealousy and envy.

It was in her nature to be superior and as perfect as possible. She might tolerate losing to Ves on matters that were secondary to her interests, but she absolutely couldn't stomach any instance where she was losing to Ves in designing mechs!

During the past week, Ves not only got a lot more work done than her, but the depth and sophistication of design solutions had also experienced a noticeable jump!

This was a change that astonished Gloriana the most. Many of the elements that Ves designed as of late not only displayed a greater understanding of highly complicated scientific theories, but also showed a better mastery of all of the different tech.

These were all signs that Ves had not only acquired a lot of new and foreign scientific knowledge, but also become a lot more adept at utilizing what he had already learned.

The rapid progress of the Dullahan Project was proof of that. He managed to advance beyond the original schedule, all the while squeezing a rudimentary Empowered Blood Sharing System into the incomplete design.

"You have moved so far ahead with the Dullahan Project that your work has gone out of sync with the rest of us." Gloriana complained. "We are all aware that you are in a hurry, but this is still a collaborative design project. Sara Voiken, Tifi Coslone and I still have to complete our own design tasks before we can catch up to you. Why don't you spend more time on your other projects instead?"

"I'm already doing that." Ves sighed. "I can work on multiple different projects at the same time. I can even spare a thread of concentration to read through an advanced textbook as well while I'm at it. It's just that I will encounter the same problems all over again. The only project where I can work at my own pace is the Eye Project, and that is only because Cormaunt Hempkamp is only responsible for designing a custom neural interface and tweaking the control systems to better convey precise and rapid aim adjustments."

His wife pulled up the current iteration of the Eye Project. She soon became shocked as she saw how much progress he made in a short amount of time!

"Wow!" Marvaine clapped his tiny hands as he bounced on his mother's lap. "It's papa's rifleman mech!"

"That it is, my dear." Gloriana absently spoke as she scrutinized the work that Ves had done to the machine. "This mech design... is halfway done!"

"That's right."

"We initially expected that it would take you half a year or a little less to complete a relatively simple, budget-conscious commercial rifleman mech, but this is ridiculous!"

Ves grinned. "Simple mech design projects don't slow me down as much as before. I can easily design them in my sleep. They're not so challenging to you either. The main reason why it takes so long to complete them is that there is a lot of tedious design work that is not particularly complex but takes a lot of mental processes to figure out the right solutions. My recent upgrades happen to accelerate this quality of mine."

She understood what he was talking about. She managed to get a closer glimpse of his new and vastly improved consciousness during the most recent times they connected their minds with each other.

If the previous Ves could be likened to an overactive teenager that suffered from a particularly bad case of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, then the new and improved Ves could be compared to a demigod that was just coming into his powers!

The changes in competence was great, though much to Gloriana's disappointment his temperament hadn't shifted as much.

She wanted his strength.

She wanted to experience the same evolution that Ves had enjoyed for reasons that he refused to share.

She wanted to stop getting outshined by her husband and rival.

Gloriana had no idea how she could experience the same kind of improvement as Ves, but she vowed to keep working on this matter until she finally regained parity with her life partner!

"When will you be done with the Eye Project?" She asked.

"It shouldn't take more than a month or a month-and-a-half." He replied. "It's a relatively conventional marksman mech all considered. There is no requirement to stuff any expensive or technologically advanced gizmos into

the design. The only gimmick that allows it to become a lot more effective in battle is Vulcan's glow, and that doesn't require much time and effort on my part."

"Will you release it onto the market right away?"

"I'm not sure, Gloriana. I'm even thinking about adding a few more elements to what should otherwise be a plain mech design."

"Don't tell me you want to add blood to Eye Project."

"Absolutely not!" Ves shook his head. "It doesn't make much sense to do so. The Eye Project is too cheap and lacking in performance to serve as any mech pilot's lifelong battle partner. Any individual who has outgrown the Eye Project should move on to better and more powerful ranged mechs. I don't want to shackle those pilots to an affordable frame. By that time, any pilot who is able to promote to a better machine will have built up the skills to recognize the weak points of an enemy machine without needing to rely on Vulcan's expert guidance."

The Eye Project may be boring to Ves, but it had the qualifications to become a bestseller on the open market!

Adding it to the LMC's mech catalog would help expand his mech company's business reach. It was bound to open new doors and help with paving the way for further expansions.

It also had the added bonus of providing a lot of spiritual feedback to Vulcan.

Once Gloriana got up to date on the Eye Project, she turned her attention to the Ghost Project.

"We haven't made as much progress on the expert stealth mech that is reserved for Venerable Zimro Belson." She said. "Not only are you taking your

time with retooling the primary stealth system, you are also doing something weird with Master Benedict Cortez."

"That's correct. I apologize for the diversion, but I am doing my best to keep the delays to a minimum."

"...Well?"

"Well what?" Ves looked confused.

"Are you going to explain what you are plotting with Master Benedict?!"  
Gloriana demanded.

"It's too early to tell. I still need to wait for Professor Benedict's answer before I know that we can proceed with this new idea." He replied. "All I can say is that I have a new idea on how I can utilize my expertise to improve the performance of his Original Energy Bridge System."

Gloriana reacted with disgust. "Are you still set on using the skull of an actual expert pilot to form an energy bridge inside the Ghost Project?"

"Those stealth systems demand a lot of energy to function to a degree where it can hide itself from the high-quality sensor systems of other expert mechs. The Endex System that is made out of substitute materials won't cut it. Besides, we happen to have the head of a Fridayman expert pilot on hand. It's doing nothing while it is in its current space. I might as well make good use of this resource to empower one of our more important expert mechs."

Ves grinned. If he had his way, then the Ghost Project would embody its code name in more ways than one!

#### Chapter 4554 Second

No matter how many times Gloriana pleaded for Ves to divulge his plans regarding the Ghost Project, she failed to obtain a solid answer.

Ves refused to share more than a couple of hints on what he was trying to cook with Master Benedict Cortez.

This left Gloriana with little choice but to piece together the clues so that she could make her own guesses.

The skull of the expert pilot played a key role in this potential new design application.

No, that was not quite correct. When the Larkinson Clan originally obtained the plasma saber of the Neo Amadeus, Master Toqueman Huron of the Gauge Dynasty had somehow integrated it with the decapitated head of an aging but still functional expert pilot.

The Fridayman expert pilot was still alive when he was stuffed inside the plasma saber, and he was still alive when he was placed under the tender care of the Larkinson Biotech Institute.

As far as Gloriana knew, the LBI carefully maintained the health of the decapitated head while also making sure the expert pilot remained dormant.

No one could predict what would happen if the pilot woke up and found that his sacrifice had been in vain. Ending up in the hands of the enemies of the Gauge Dynasty might drive poor bastard to suicide!

Gloriana became increasingly more suspicious that Ves might not want to kill the expert pilot at all. A living demigod was a much more powerful resource than a dead one.

Why settle for the bare skull of an expert pilot when the entire intact living head had the potential to bestow much greater power to the Ghost Project?!

Although Gloriana was not completely opposed to an upgrade to their initial plans for the expert stealth mech design, she became upset when her vision for the Ghost Project began to diverge from that of her husband.

It was never a good idea for two mech designers to misalign their visions while working on the same design project!

"Be patient, honey. I can't tell you anything further until I have received further confirmation and corroboration." Ves explained. "To be honest, I don't have a clear idea of the outcome of my efforts. The potential results are so open-ended that it is better for me to wait until I have obtained more solid data."

She would have to be satisfied with that. They completed their discussion on the Ghost Project and moved on to sharing their views on the other ongoing design projects.

The Bloodripper Project, the Greenaxe Project and the Samurai Project were all progressing at a normal rate. They were the least dependent on Ves' input so they did not benefit too much from his latest changes.

The only oddity is the 'brand new' Blood Knight Project that Ves had shoved into the pipeline.

When Gloriana called up the design schematics of this biomech, she could clearly recognize that it was completely aligned to Ves' distinctive design style.

She just found it disturbing that Ves chose to design a biomech of all things. He never showed an interest in biotechnology and biomechs in the past. For him to expose that he had been studying biotechnology and designed a completely viable biomech in his own time was a massive shock, especially to someone who knew him well like Gloriana!

It didn't make any sense. Gloriana had a pretty good idea on how Ves spent his time.

She found it important to keep track of her husband's activities. She wanted to know whether Ves was spending his time productively by contributing to his ongoing design projects or whether he became sidetracked by a radical new research project.



She also wanted to know whether Ves would get caught up in some sort of event that might lead the Golden Skull Alliance into another conflict!

Of course, the main reason why Gloriana insisted on tracking Ves was because she wanted to know if he was meeting with any women!

He periodically met with Director Calabast in person and also communicated increasingly more with Director Ranya Wodin.

Gloriana slightly narrowed her eyes.

Even though both of those women had settled down and hooked up with high-ranking members of the Larkinson Clan, Gloriana still couldn't rid herself of the fear that Ves might be tempted into starting an affair.

From what she knew about Ves, he was way too loyal to betray her, especially when it would harm their little family. He loved her and their children too much to inflict so much suffering in their lives.

That didn't mean that Ves was immune to getting seduced.

Gloriana understood extremely well that assertive women tended to have their way with her husband. As long as they adopted the right attitude and avoided attracting any hostility, they could potentially wrap Ves around their fingers!

She should know, because this was exactly how she managed to snag him in the first place!

Thinking about all of the women that might want to take her husband away from him caused her to release a low growl.

"What's wrong, mama?" Marvaine looked up at her with his adoring eyes.

"There is nothing done, my little teddy bear."

The two cuddled with each other for a time. Gloriana was proud of her son. Even though he was only a few years old, his academic performance was already leagues ahead of all of his peers in the clan!

"Ves?"

"Yes, dear?"

"I have a proposal about Marvaine's schooling."

"Hm?" Ves grew intrigued as he turned his attention away from a flow chart of some sort. "Didn't we agree earlier that we should just put him in one of our schools so that he can socialize with other kids? You also promised to set up a special study program that will allow our son to make full use of his developing learning capabilities."

"That is true. It is in the course of composing that study program that I started to come across an incredibly promising possibility."

This sounded serious. Ves temporarily set aside his distractions and focused fully on his wife.

She had become more active and animated now that she was introducing one of her own initiatives.

The fact that it was related to their first son made it even more important for her to bring up this matter!

Once she saw that Ves was taking her seriously, she began to speak.

"Let me start at the beginning. In order to determine Marvaine's lesson program for the next few years, I first needed to know what he has already mastered and how quickly he can learn subjects of varying difficulty."

"Okay...?"

Gloriana proudly smiled as she began to ruffle Marvaine's cute hair. "In order to obtain the most comprehensive information possible, I put Marvaine through a day-long virtual testing program that Witshaw & Yeneca has specially developed to measure the intellectual accomplishments of its organic products.

It made sense to use a test from the genetics company as its scientists understood the capabilities of their designer babies the best.

The test was mostly used to make comparisons. Even if a designer baby was formulated to be smart, there were always a lot of variations in the actual outcomes.

Designer babies derived from the exact same base designer formula could in performance by as much as 60 percent!

It all had to do with upbringing, nutrition and other growth circumstances.

While Gloriana believed that she and her husband went above and beyond to nurture Marvaine to the best of their abilities, there was no guarantee that their efforts allowed their son to maximize his potential.

She was much more anxious about the results of the test than any other parent in her position!

"So what's the verdict?" Ves questioned. "Our son is definitely not an idiot. He's way smarter than any of the other designer babies of his age, at least when it comes to the ones present in our fleet. He is probably the smartest kid out of everyone. We didn't spend 100,000 MTA credits in vain, and little Denny has increased his mental development on top of everything else."

Given Gloriana's obvious expression of pride, the test results were undoubtedly good.

The only question was to what extent Marvaine outperformed his peers. Witshaw & Seneca once told the Larkinsons that they were not the only ones to make use of Formula U-775128-MMT.

There were an unknown number of other children out in human space who acquired the same talents and dispositions.

How did Marvaine measure up against his genetic 'siblings'? Even if Ves had given his son a companion spirit, he did not believe that other parents who were wealthy enough to pay 100,000 MTA credits had no other way to boost the intelligence of their little geniuses!

"About the test results..."

"Hurry up, Gloriana. Don't keep me in suspense!"

"Fine! Our son came in second."

"Second of what?" Ves frowned. "Wait, there is a kid who was born from the same base designer baby formula that is even smarter than Marvaine? How?!"

"I do not have a clue. I demanded a representative from Witshaw & Seneca to clarify this matter, but the man refused to give in to my request in order to protect the privacy of the company's clients. However, when I read between the lines of my discussion, I am certain that the top performer of the test is a child who has grown up in a first-rate state."

Ves blinked. "A first-rater?"

He felt a lot more mollified after hearing that. The package they bought for Marvaine was priced well outside the spending range of the vast majority of second-raters. Only an exceedingly few successful businessmen or powerful statesmen could afford to invest that much cash into the development of one of their offspring!

Gloriana stared at her husband for a few seconds. "You don't understand what that means."

"Am I supposed to read more in this result?"

"For all of your improved smarts, you still have the same faults as before."

"Can you just tell me what I am supposed to comprehend already?!"

"When I spoke to the company representative, he revealed to me that the top scorer has amply met the standard needed to attend first-class primary schools. Since our son has performed almost just as well, we can enroll him into a first-class primary school as well. So long as he is able to keep up with his classes, he can earn the qualifications to attend a first-class secondary school. If he continues to do well, he will eventually be able to apply to a genuine first-class mech design university!"

Ves finally knew why Gloriana treated this as a big deal. He glanced down at Marvaine who was happily playing with his mother's smooth fingers as if they were toys.

It was hard to imagine that this small and curious child already possessed the qualifications to enter a track that would eventually allow him to become a first-class mech designer!

If Marvaine fully committed to this elite and highly privileged educational trajectory, he might be able to become a first-class mech designer sooner than his parents!

Even though Ves felt an incredible amount of pride at the amazing talent of his son, he soon began to feel concerned.

"Wait, if we want to give him an opportunity to become a first-rater, do we need to send him to a first-class school in an upper zone?"

"I already looked it up." Gloriana said. "It is indeed mandatory for pupils to attend most first-class schools. They possess special high-tech facilities that can help with absorbing knowledge and learning more profound lessons, but they are only effective if the children can access them in person."

Ves immediately frowned. "I am not going to send my son off to a boarding school."

To her credit, Gloriana agreed with him despite the fact that she wanted the best for her child.

"I do not want our child to grow up as a stranger either. I started to look up opportunities where he can attend first-class virtual schools instead. They exist, but their circumstances are much different. Just getting our child accepted into them is a massive hurdle onto itself. We have to decide whether it is worth it to take the risk to put Marvaine through this ordeal or settle for putting him in our own schools."

This was anything but a simple decision!

#### **Chapter 4555 Early Birthday Present**

Before Ves was comfortable with discussing Marvaine's future trajectory, he wanted to see for himself what kind of genius he had raised under his nose.

While the test results provided by Witshaw & Seneca were filled with lots of statistics that tried to quantify Marvaine's comprehensive cognitive abilities in excruciating detail, they did not mean much to him. It was all numbers and graphs. Even the reference values that were supposed to give context by making comparisons did not give him a good understanding of what his impressive son could actually do at his tender age.

This was why he opted to test his kid in a completely different way.

He gazed down at his boy. Marvaine squinted in pleasure as Gloriana neatly combed his brown tufts of hair into a more dignified style.

"Marvaine?"

"Yes, papa?"

"I have a birthday present lying around in a nearby storage cabinet. I originally wanted to wait to give it to you until you were a little older, but your mother and I are so happy that you have done well in your studies that I decided to hand it over to you today!"

His son's eyes lit up as if he was having the best day ever!

"Really? Yay! I want my present! I want my present! I want my present! Where is it, papa?!"

"Please wait. I've already ordered a couple of bots to bring over your present. It's a bit big, but it will definitely be fun, I promise!"

Ves slyly avoided any description of the present that he had prepared for his son. Though Marvaine grew increasingly more frustrated at the lack of answers, his mood soon lifted as five different lifter bots floated into the design lab.

Each of them carried secure metal crates that were typically used to hold high-value goods and materials.

Gloriana's eyes glazed over for a moment as she thought about what was in those crates.

"Brings back memories." She whispered. "I had so much fun with them. Now, my boy is following suit. I'm so proud."

She already knew what her husband had prepared for a birthday present. The two held a discussion about it a year ago. They had bought a set back in one of the luxury toy stores located in the Trinity Mall in Davute.

They bought the present in advance because it would be a lot harder to get it shipped to their flagship once the expeditionary fleet resumed its journey again.

It was also a lot easier to specify the contents and the configuration of the set through a store that officially licensed the toy system.

The bots carefully put down the crates before making their way out. Ves waited until they left through the hatch of the design lab.

Once the hatch closed shut, he approached the nearest crate and transmitted a code that automatically disengaged its lock.

The metal structure soon unfolded, revealing a gleaming boxed package that was covered by bright colors and action-packed images!

A young boy and a young girl were holding different miniature mech limbs as they were in the middle of assembling a mech figurine.

A slightly older boy was doing the same, but instead of holding an entire mech arm, he was in the middle of slotting a foot into a leg socket.

A pair of other children who almost looked to be in their teens were working together on putting together a more complicated miniature mech. They were working with parts that were so small that they had to use tweezers and other specialized tools to slot sensor modules into the sockets of a head or energy cells inside a fixed internal structure of a miniature mech.

Aside from showing off different children having lots of fun while piecing together toy mechs from different building blocks, they also showed the toy mechs in action.

It soon became clear that the little machines weren't simple blocks of metal or composites when they were pieced together.



The cover of the packaging showed a jumble of completed miniature mechs brawling against each other in a small arena!

On one side, a swordsman mech flew into the air with the help of its 'flight system' which was actually just a miniaturized antigrav module. Its weapon was in the middle of swinging onto a floating miniature rifleman mech which was firing kinetic projectiles made out of harmless foam.

On the other side, a miniature heavy artillery mech was firing a salvo of extremely low-powered optical beams onto a classic miniature knight mech.

A miniature light skirmisher was just about to stab its blunted daggers into the back of the artillery mech, but a miniature striker mech that was hiding from behind a fake structure fired a spray of colored water that was supposed to represent flames in the fast-moving machine's direction.

Marvaine's mood and expression grew increasingly more ecstatic when he recognized the present his father had bought for him! It was a toy franchise that was regularly featured in the ads whenever he and his sisters watched those cartoon dramas!

"It's a Mekano Set!" He exclaimed with glee!

"That's not entirely correct." Ves grinned as he commanded the remaining secure crates to reveal their contents.

They all unfolded at the same time, revealing packaged boxes that depicted different toy mechs and parts, but all featured the same trademarked logo!

"It's not just one Mekano Set, but five of them! They will provide you with plenty of parts and components to play with for the time being!"

Any child who was even remotely interested in designing their own mechs one day would definitely go wild when they first received a Mekano Set!

Marvaine was no exception! He completely forgot about his mother's embrace and jumped from her lap in order to run over to the nearest box!

He pressed his cute little hands against the smooth composite surface of the attractively packaged box.

"You can already read and understand a lot of words, right?" Ves asked.

Marvaine nodded.

"Then what does this line say?"

"It says... 'My First Mech Set' and 'Best entry into the world of Mekano'..."

"That's right, Marvaine. This set is where all Mekano players start with. It contains all of the basic, foundational toy mech parts and components that you will need to start putting together a variety of toy mechs. They won't look fancy or anything, but you should start with this set alone before branching out to more complicated constructions."

"Ohhh..."

Ves pointed at another line. "What does this say?"

"It says 'Machine Emporium - Founded by the Polymath'. Wait, is she..."

"Yes, Marvaine." Gloriana said as she steadily walked up to him. "The Polymath is the best and youngest Star Designer of our race. She initially created Mekano in order to introduce young and curious children such as you to the wonders and complexity of mech design. It can start out simple, but it can become increasingly more complex and intricate as you unlock the higher levels."

That was the most brilliant part about Mekano. The degree of complexity and customization of the toy parts that could be used to build toy mechs could vary. Every difficulty tier was divided into different levels.

Level 1 was the simplest one. It simply separated toy mechs into large and obvious parts such as arms, legs, heads and torsos.

A kid did not need to know anything to be able to slot them together into complete mechs. The slots were extremely obvious and the parts would refuse to connect with each other if they were incompatible.

Level 2 was when these larger parts could be divided into smaller chunks. Half of a mech arm could be pulled away so that a kid could put an integrated gauss cannon into the exposed elbow socket.

Level 3 was considered the limit of what small children could handle without needing to learn any math, science or engineering. They could slot in big mech parts such as different power reactors and mech engines into the torso of a toy mech.

Levels 4, 5 and 6 was where Mekano started to become less of a game and more of a training tool for budding teenagers that were hoping to attend a mech design university in the future.

This was the range where they started with progressively smaller components, so much so that they could no longer assemble their toy mechs by hand. They needed to make use of specialized assembly equipment to put all of the tiny parts in place.

They could assemble mech rifles out of individual components.

They could customize the internal architecture of a toy mech to an increasingly finer degree.

They could even start with programming custom instructions that determined the behavior of the mech in a selective fashion.

Level 6 was the maximum degree of complexity that Mekano could initially accommodate. A child with a good understanding of high school-level science

and engineering should be able to piece together a reasonably functional toy mech.

The Machine Emporium even set up entire tournament circuits where teenagers and other young prodigy publically competed against each other! It was as if they were all participating in the kids version of a mech design competition!

In practice, any child that could already handle level 6 was pretty much a half-way into becoming a decent mech designer. They just needed to attend a number of advanced university-level courses before they could move on to designing actual mechs!

When the Polymath initially released Mekano, it quickly took the mech industry and the toy industry by storm!

Toy mech building systems already existed by that time. One of the most popular franchises was an old one that had been producing colorful composite building blocks long before the Age of Stars commenced!

Yet when the Polymath entered this market, she quickly conquered a lot of fans because Mekano was simply better than its immediate competitors!

The Polymath had worked hard to make Mekano as complex and intricate as the consumers wanted it to be. A typical Mekano Set started out at Level 1, but by transmitting a special command, the large mech parts automatically broke up into smaller parts as they switched to Level 2.

The owner of the Mekano Set could keep doing this until the toy parts reached the maximum level determined by the tier of the products.

Tier 3 Mekano Sets were by far the most common ones sold throughout human space. They could only reach Level 3 at most, but that made them cheap and easy to produce. Pretty much every toy store in every third-rate state sold a small range of sets at this tier!

Tier 6 Mekano Sets were more commonly seen in second-rate states. They were indistinguishable from the prior products up to Level 3. It was only when a parent transmitted a command that switched the mover to Level 4, Level 5 or Level 6 that they started to get a lot more interesting!

Originally, Mekano Sets could go no further than Tier 6. Going any further would mean that the consumer had to be a fully-fledged Novice Mech Designer in order to work with parts at such a fine level!

However, for reasons that no one could figure out, the Polymath soon came out with Tier 7, Tier 8 and even Tier 9 sets, each of which became exponentially more expensive and demanding!

When Mekano reached Level 7, then the only people who could make functional toy mechs out of the parts were those who already possessed the skills of a third-class Novice Mech Designer.

At Level 8, only people who reached the standard of a second-class Novice Mech Designer could still have fun with Mekano.

Level 9 was exclusively reserved for first-raters who had already become talented and knowledgeable enough to qualify as first-class Novice Mech Designers!

If that wasn't enough, there were even rumors that the Polymath developed Tier 10 Mekano Sets, which contained parts that were supposedly made out of nanomachines that could provide maximum control and design freedom to the few consumers who were lucky to play with these secret toys!

Ves didn't dare to dream about buying the two highest tiers of Mekano Sets. He had gone for the highest possible tiers that he could access and afford at the time.

Each of the 5 sets that he had bought for Marvaine were Tier 8 Mekano Sets, and the cheapest one was priced at 999 MTA credits!

Though the toy store where he bought the initial Mekano Sets also offered more elaborate and advanced products, their prices became increasingly more exorbitant!

It didn't matter too much for the time being. Marvaine was still too young to be able to make good use of the advanced sets. The beginner sets were more than adequate enough to keep him busy for a few years.

#### Chapter 4556 Mekano

"These are very expensive toys, Marvaine. While they are built to be as safe and childproof as possible, you need to handle all of the parts with utmost respect. Treat them like how a real mech designer treats his own mechs. Do you understand, my son?"

"I understand, papa." Marvaine cutely said. He looked so adorable when he pretended to be serious.

It didn't take long before he turned back into an overeager kid. He was rubbing the side of the boxes as if he couldn't wait to unlock them and piece together his first toy mechs!

Ves could understand the kid's enthusiasm. Which mech-obsessed boy wouldn't want to play with Mekano? Even those that wanted to become mech pilots rather than mech designers when they grew up played with them if possible.

While not every child was interested in the intricacies of mech design at their ages, they all loved to put together a finished Mekano that they could play with themselves!

This was a lot better than buying a finished action figure in a toy store. As awesome as they were, they rarely provided any room for deep customization.

In fact, entire informal communities had sprung up where children who became good at playing with Mekano offered their 'design' services to other kids!

These circles became so elaborate that they practically resembled the actual mech industry and mech market!

They even came up with their own jargon and terminology to pretend as if it was more serious than a game.

The kids who became good at designing these toy mechs became known as Mekano designers.

The children who did not want their toys to fight by themselves with the help of semi-programmable AIs and operated them by remote control started to be known as Mekano pilots.

It was truly a childish reflection of the actual mech community!

Perhaps that was the point. Anyone who got caught up in the Mekano scene got to experience the mech community in advance.

Ves didn't intend for Marvaine to join these game communities, but he wouldn't mind it if he did become a budding Mekano designer.

It was good practice and allowed him to learn a bunch of harsh truths that he could only learn from experience rather than reading about them in textbooks.

"What is in the other boxes?!" Marvaine asked as he raced over to the next Mekano Set.

"That's the Basic Ranged Mech Set. It contains a decent variety of ranged toy mech parts, enough for you to design all kinds of Mekanos that can fight at range."

"And this one?"

"The Basic Melee Mech Set is the same as the last one, but is oriented towards melee combat instead. There are plenty of swords, spear, daggers, axes and hammers, though it is lacking in more exotic weaponry such as halberds and flails."

"What about this one? I don't understand what it contains."

"I'm not surprised that you can't figure it out. This is the Basic Internals Set. It contains a large collection of internal mech parts and components that you can use to customize the performance of a Mekano further. You can swap a weaker power reactor for a stronger model at the cost of taking up more space and weighing down your little machine."

"And this one?"

"That is one of the themed Mekano Sets that the regional branch of the Machine Emporium has released. The Krakatoa Set contains all of the essential parts derived from a decent selection of commonly sold mech models in the Krakatoa Middle Zone. I am sure you can recognize at least a few of the mechs on the packaging."

Marvaine circled around the last Mekano Set in order to observe all of the artwork.

"Your mechs aren't here, papa."

Ves sheepishly smiled. "That's because the First Edition of this set was released before our Living Mech Corporation gained a foothold of the market. It's at least half a decade out of date, but it is fine. I am sure that the Machine Emporium will get around to adding LMC mechs in the Third Edition or Fourth Edition of the Krakatoa Set."

His cute little son became upset. "I don't wanna wait that long! Can you make your own Mekano Set?"



"It's not that simple, Marvaine." Ves shook his head. "Mekano is a protected brand and strictly rejects parts that are not officially authorized and produced by the Machine Emporium. While I can go to a production machine and fabricate imitation parts that resemble the authentic Mekano components, they won't fit together. The real Mekano parts will somehow be able to detect that the false ones are not authentic and will actively shut down or produce glitches. This is one of the many measures the Machine Emporium employs to protect its brand."

He could fabricate entire sets that corresponded to the authentic versions, but there was little point to doing so. It would take a lot of time to do much of the work that the Polymath and the excellent designers employed by the Machine Emporium had invested into the toy mech building system.

If he really wanted to play with something similar to Mekano but without spending so much money, he could opt for the products sold by the Machine Emporium's competitors instead.

Ever since Mekano broke into the scene, it had rapidly occupied the upper segment of the market. Its rich features and its consistently high quality provided a lot of fun and benefits to the customers who were rich enough to pay for the pricey sets.

Other toy mech building systems managed to survive and occupy their own places in the market by targeting the lower segments. They were all good in their own ways, but they simply couldn't beat a system originally developed by an actual Star Designer!

Though the Polymath had long since moved on to other, more grander projects, Mekano was still expanding in popularity. It didn't even matter that the honorable Clair Hamzo had long sold off most of her stake in the Machine Emporium. Mekano was always tied to her name.

"Can I play with them now, papa?"

"Sure you can, but only with the first set. Let's leave these boxes aside for later. You should first master the basics before you expand your range."

His son looked disappointed. "Oh."

"You need to learn how to walk before you learn how to run. Come on, Marvaine! Let's open the My First Mech Set so that you can put together your first real Mekano!"

Ves tapped the box, causing it to automatically unfold and expand into what appeared to be an elaborate cabinet.

A projection came to life that depicted a couple of brand logos before playing a slick introduction video.

It was clearly aimed towards young children who just became introduced to Mekano. The cartoon mascots cheerfully explained the basic operation of Mekano, so that saved Ves a lot of trouble in explaining it all himself.

Gloriana quietly walked up to his side as their son became engrossed by the introduction video. Her eyes grew wistful as she stared at the exposed toy mech parts revealed by the unpacked box.

"I never imagined our son would begin to play with Mekano so soon. I was only seven years old before my mother allowed me to build my first Mekanos. I had so much fun back then. I had strived to make as few mistakes as possible right from the beginning. I still remember all of the looks of disappointment from my mother whenever I made a mistake or presented her with an ugly Mekano."

"That... sounds a little harsh." Ves frowned in disapproval. "It's all well and good to develop good habits when you are still young, but the reason why Mekano is so popular is because it offers plenty of freedom for its players to

exercise their creativity. Experimenting with Mekano design is an integral part of the game. Who cares whether you got it wrong? You can just alter or disassemble a Mekano without incurring any cost."

Unlike a real mech, a Mekano could always be broken down into parts without producing any waste. Every part remained whole when pulled away and could always be used to build other Mekanos.

This was important because it minimized the cost of experimentation and exploration.

Gloriana did not agree with her husband, however.

"Just because you can doesn't mean you should. It can take many hours to develop a Mekano at the middle levels. Rather than waste my precious time to build Mekanos that aren't even serious, I opted to approach this game as a simulation of my future career. It has done me a lot of good, actually. I wouldn't have been able to graduate from Kelma University so easily if I hadn't benefited from years of 'practical training'."

He envied her. His own father never even thought about buying a Mekano Set for himself. The Tier 3 sets available in the Bright Republic were too basic to provide much educational value to teenagers. Most kids his age treated Mekano strictly as a slightly more serious game.

"What level of Mekano did you manage to reach?"

"I managed to reach Level 5." Gloriana replied. "That was when it truly started to get fun. I was not only working with smaller components, but also had to fiddle with the programming of my Mekanos. I gained the right to selectively edit a few lines of programming so that I could optimize their performance in specific situations. I would have wanted to move on to the next level, but by that time I had no choice but to drop it so that I can learn how to design real mechs."

Ves rubbed his hairless chin. "Level 5, huh? I guess that is pretty impressive, though I expected you to reach Level 6 considering your standards."

"Trust me, I wanted to reach this level as well, but my study load was already great back then. My mother demanded that I learn so many different subjects that I didn't have enough hours to spare on Mekanos. Entire days went by as my Mekanos remained half-complete. It's ultimately just a game to me, so I was not terribly upset when I could finally learn how to design real mechs."

"I see. It sounds like you made good use of it in the limited time available to you. What level will our son be able to reach, you think?"

"That is difficult for me to say." Gloriana frowned. "He is much smarter at his age than I was back then. He should definitely be able to hit Level 6 and probably Level 7 before he is ready to go off to university. He may even reach Level 8, but that is contingent on many factors. If he is able to receive first-class schooling and keep up with his demanding classes, then I see no reason he should be able to acquire much of the skills of a second-class Novice Mech Designer."

Reaching Level 8 did not necessarily mean a child was genuinely as competent as an actual mech designer. There were still many differences between Mekanos and mechs. The former simplified a lot of obscure details in order to streamline the design and assembly process as much as possible.

It was still a great sign if any child was able to play with Mekanos at this level without getting lost!

The fact that Ves bothered to invest in Tier 8 Mekano Sets in the first place already exposed how confident he was in his son!

Even if Marvaine only hit Level 6 at most before he had to move on to grown-up activities, it was not that big of a waste. Mekano parts never became obsolete so Ves could simply pass them on to his grandchildren.

"Papa, mama, I'm ready to design my first mech! What do you think I should start with? Ranged mechs are so cool, but melee mechs are also awesome. I can't choose!"

#### Chapter 4557 Little Mekano Designer

"I suggest you start with putting together a knight mech." Ves said. "It's a tradition to begin with one as this mech type is the simplest, sturdiest and most fault-tolerant of them all. Even if you make a mistake, your toy mech won't fall apart."

He suddenly felt nails poking in his tough skin. It turned out that his wife took offense at this remark!

"Don't listen to your father, Marvaine. Try to take this as seriously as possible. If you want to become the best mech designer in the future, then you cannot settle for substandard results. If your Mekano looks wrong, then keep working at it until you stop feeling bothered. Do not complete any Mekano that you are too ashamed to show off to us. The more you get used to working this way, the better of a mech designer you will become once you become a real mech designer like your mother and father."

It didn't matter too much at the beginning. When Marvaine finally plucked the parts that were attached to the unfolded cabinet, he easily pieced together his first Mekano!

It was as simple as putting together a doll. Marvaine just had to start with plucking out a thick and heavily armored torso before fitting in arms and legs that were robust enough to fit with the frame.

Marvaine easily finished the Mekano by picking out a thick and armored head before placing a tiny sword and shield in its hands.

"That's not so hard, isn't?" Ves smiled as he held the finished Mekano. "Do you want to make more Mekanos like this or are you ready to move on to Level 2?"

His son eagerly nodded.

"Alright, go ahead and disassemble this Mekano back into its individual parts before putting them where they belong. Cleaning up your messes and recycling your unwanted work are also important habits."

It took much faster for Marvaine to unplug the limbs and place them back to their original spots.

Ves proceeded to send a transmission that caused the parts of the Mekano Set to light up and release a sound.

The cabinet soon expanded a bit more in order to create more space. Many parts began to split into multiple pieces as they became a lot less convenient than before.

When Marvaine decided to design a toy rifleman mech, he barely had to struggle to find the right parts. They were all easily recognizable even though it took a bit of time to find the parts with the right sizes and properties.

He soon managed to complete his second Mekano. It was supposed to depict a fairly generic and boring rifleman mech, and didn't have any design traits that interested his parents.

That did not stop Ves and Gloriana from feeling happy. There were many kids at his age who already struggled to make sense of Level 2 Mekano parts!

Gloriana held the finished miniature rifleman mech in her hands and turned it around a few times.

"Marvaine?"

"Yes, mama?"

"Real mech design is not just about finding the first parts that match your requirements and putting them all together without much thought. While a mech like this can definitely work in reality, any decent mech designer can do the same. If you want to become as good as us, then you need to start adopting one of our approaches to mech design."

The little boy looked confused.

"What your mother is trying to tell you is that you should make your mechs a little more special." Ves spoke up. "If we tell you to design a knight mech, don't just make one that looks normal. Normal is boring. Before you pick your parts, you should spend a few minutes visualizing what you want to make in your mind. Try and come up with an image of a mech that looks a little more fun and unique than ordinary machines. Only then should you begin with selecting the parts that correspond the closest to the design in your head."

That was a lot more understandable to Marvaine.

When Ves requested him to make a miniature swordsman mech, his son finally began to show greater initiative.

Ves and Gloriana happily observed as Marvaine did not impulsively reach out to grab new parts, but actually sat still to visualize his next design.

It was a bit difficult, but eventually Marvaine seemed to have settled on a specific look.

When he began to reach out to pull off different parts from the cabinet, he no longer browsed the available selection at random.

Instead, he moved with actual purpose. He specifically chose parts that fit the dimensions that he had in mind for them. His slightly more serious performance already reminded Ves and Gloriana of their younger years!

"I'm finished!"

Both parents stared at the completed Mekano with odd expressions.

It turned out that while Marvaine had diverged from making a generic toy swordsman mech, he had instead opted to make a straightforward imitation of Ketis' Monster Slayer model!

The greatsword that looked slightly oversized to the rather slender and agile mech frame was so incongruous that it would probably perform badly if it entered into a duel against another Mekano.

There was an important reason why Marvaine's greatsword-wielding Mekano was awful compared to Ketis' Monster Slayer.

The former was made out of 'standardized' parts while the latter were mainly custom-designed and fine-tuned to fit the design concept!

Arms and legs that looked nearly the same on the outside were actually radically different on the inside.

The only way for Marvaine to make his poor miniature imitation of the Monster Slayer viable was to tinker with the smaller components. He could only do that at the higher levels.

"Okay, please disassemble this swordsman mech. I think you are ready for the next level."

Once Ves unlocked Level 3, the cabinet changed even further. The existing parts broke up even further. Some of them were so small that they could not be attached onto a Mekano with hands or fingers.

This was why the cabinet slid out a drawer containing a set of basic, childproof tools.

"Ohhh." Marvaine became fascinated by the appearance of the tools. Some of them looked similar to the ones his parents used when they were building together their own products!



"Alright, you can choose what mech you want to make next. Don't worry too much about getting it wrong. Just make something that looks fun and nice."

Gloriana angrily elbowed her husband, only to yelp in pain as she only ended up hurting herself!

Marvaine didn't care. He already began the rudimentary visualization process that his parents had just taught him. He frowned several times as he easily became distracted by fanciful thoughts, but soon managed to form a coherent vision.

He moved his limbs, snatching up various parts, only a few of which were large.

There was no need for children to tinker and modify with key parts such as the power reactor or other internals at Level 3. The main customization options were related to external parts as they were easy to understand with the naked eye.

He had to pick up the right tool in order to snatch up the smallest external modules such as individual fingers and the sensor modules that were supposed to slot into the eye sockets of a mech.

After that, it took a lot more time for Marvaine to assemble his third Mekano. It couldn't be helped as the number of parts a Mekano was made up had increased by several times.

The young boy also had to learn how to use different precision tools to put the smaller parts in the right places.

He managed to complete his work in the end. Once he set down his tools, he presented a miniature... something mech.

"I suppose we can classify this as a hybrid mech." Gloriana generously said as she picked up her son's latest work.

Marvaine had made a bold choice by building an asymmetrical Mekano. It featured a flamethrower arm and held an axe in the other arm.

He placed tiny missile launchers onto the shoulders of the Mekano and also opted to attach small laser weapons onto the ankles of the mech for whatever reason.

If that wasn't enough, it also carried a tower shield on its back. While that massively weighed the mech down, it provided excellent protection against attacks from the rear. The messy hybrid mech could also choose to hold it with its only arm at the cost of dropping its axe.

Though Gloriana had a lot to say about the countless flaws of this design, she did her best to avoid going on a tirade.

Mistakes like these were inexcusable if Marvaine could already do better, but right now he still had a lot more to learn.

"Do you think you are ready for a greater challenge, Marvaine?"

"Can I go to Level 4?!"

Gloriana couldn't withhold her objections this time.

"Yes! Don't go too far! Our son isn't ready yet. If this Mekano represents the standard of his work at Level 3, then he needs to spend more time on polishing his designs. Let us wait until he has learned how to make proper Mekanos at this level first before we unlock the next one. We absolutely cannot afford to ruin his foundation!"

That did not sit well with him. "I know that, but the reason why I decided to give Marvaine his early birthday present was to test his competences. He can go further, Gloriana. Level 3 isn't his limit. Sure, he might not be able to develop any good Mekanos at Level 4, but it is already fine if he can finish one that is at least barely functional."

This was quite important to him, so he proceeded to unlock Level 4 without bothering to listen to his wife's complaints.

"VES!"

Both father and son ignored Gloriana's sounds of frustration and stared at the cabinet as it became even more elaborate and rich with selections.

Not only did all of the parts become smaller and more numerous, the cabinet also presented brand new categories in the form of many different internal components.

A Mekano player could no longer depend on intuition and common sense to put together a functioning toy mech. A rudimentary understanding of science or at least electronics was needed to make the internal components work.

Normally, only children who were older than 12 tended to be ready to make Mekanos at Level 4, and they had to be pretty talented and well-off. Marvaine was way too young to properly handle this degree of complexity, but it was fine if he merely tried it out a single time.

"Don't make anything too fancy this time." Ves suggested. "Just stick to a knight mech. You can try and make it more fun by changing a few details, but don't go overboard."

"Okay, papa."

It took a lot more time for Marvaine to complete his fourth Mekano. It took a lot more time for him to figure out the components and the rudimentary design solutions needed to assemble his machine.

The quantity of parts had also grown so much that Marvaine had to do a lot of manual precision work to fit them in the right places.

While Machine Emporium sold all kinds of advanced miniature production machines that could speed up or automate the assembly process entirely, that took all of the fun out of the game as far as Ves was concerned.

Even Gloriana disapproved of them because it would make her son grow lazy and build up a dependency on automation.

This was why both parents started a new design session so that they could get actual work done during this time.

A strange harmony descended onto the design lab as father, mother and son all directed their concentration on their own mech design projects!

It eventually took five hours for Marvaine to put together a simple knight mech.

"I'm done! What do you think?"

Ves paused his work and picked up the knight mech that his son had painstakingly assembled by hand.

"This... is quite decent."

It was a rather boring and generic knight mech for the most part. The only elements that stood out was Marvaine had equipped the Mekano with a half-moon shield and also attached a mech rifle onto the back.

The premise of the mech was a little more interesting than normal, and it could still work in reality!

"Let me take a closer look." Gloriana demanded.

She snatched the toy from Ves' hands and scrutinized it in great detail.

"This... is a functional Mekano. It is sloppy, but it can actually fight against other Mekanos if put into action."

"You sound surprised."

Gloriana turned to her husband. "This is a Level 4 Mekano! Do you know what it means for a boy this young to build a working toy mech of this complexity?!"

"I guess that test from Witshaw & Yeneca is accurate. Someone who came in second in a whole group of designer babies that were literally engineered to excel in mech design should most definitely be able to handle Level 4."

"OUR SON IS A GENIUS!" Gloriana exclaimed! "Forget about teaching him how to design second-class mechs in our own schools. He has to attend first-class school at all costs!"

#### Chapter 4558 Proud Parents

Ves gazed at his brown-haired son in a slightly different light than before. He always had high expectations for Marvaine. No matter whether he became a mech designer or another professional, his son's future was always bright due to his abundance of talent.

To learn that Marvaine genetic, mental and spiritual development granted him so many advantages that he had reached parity with first-raters was a surprise.

For the longest the longest time, Ves regarded first-raters as unattainable existences. It was a harsh reality that the citizens of first-rate states and the people working for the Big Two simply lived better lives than anyone else.

They enjoyed services that were unaffordable and unattainable to space peasants.

They could easily afford genetic treatments and augmentations that produced fewer side effects while offering superior results.

They utilized their vast wealth and power to build trade networks throughout the rest of human space, allowing them to absorb a significant portion of the valuable goods and materials produced outside their regions.

The huge disparity between first-raters and the rest of humanity effectively split human civilization into two different pieces.

The larger piece of humanity represented the masses. In truth, each of them were pretty much a part of the underclass of human society. It didn't matter whether they grew up in the most awful third-rate state or the most enlightened second-rate state, all of them were considered space peasants in the eyes of the true elite.

It was the comparatively smaller piece of humanity that effectively led the entire civilization. Their wealth, their heritage and most importantly their iron grip on all of the trans-galactic institutions meant that the interests of this extremely prosperous and privileged group were always served before the space peasants ever got their turn!

Much could be done to improve the lot of space peasants who lived in a completely different world than their betters. The fact that the Big Two and anyone else with sufficient power never thought to bridge the many gaps was intolerable.

The fact of the matter was that there were plenty of first-raters who basically posited that they had already evolved beyond the baser forms of humanity!

Just like how high-gravity variant humans was treated as an inferior strain of humanity that was only good for menial labor work, the stuffy elites who looked down on the galaxies from their ivory towers claimed that the space peasants should be treated as an outdated version of humanity!

The new humans who grew up under vastly superior circumstances were so far removed from the dirty rabble that they effectively constituted a different race unto themselves!

They were all genetically optimized at the very least and were completely reproductively isolated from baseline humans at the very worst!

That was considered to be a major threat to humanity to those that considered baseline humans to be the root of their race.

However, the first-raters who never grew up or even met a single baseline human in their prosperous lives were completely detached from this notion!

It was not strange for them to develop an intense disdain towards the humans who were left behind.

If not for the fact that the galactic heartland, the galactic rim and now the less prosperous zones of the Red Ocean supplied them with a large quantity of useful resources, perhaps the first-raters might have already decided to wipe out the inferior variants in order to clean up the total population of humanity!

As it was, the two pieces of humanity lived awkwardly alongside each other. The superior people continued to lord it over the masses without doing anything meaningful to heal the divide.

Ves therefore had mixed feelings about letting his son mingle with the crowd of elitists.

He didn't have much experience with interacting with first-raters outside of the Big Two, but if the mechers and fleters were any indication, none of them were really pleasant people to be around!

Yet... Ves yearned to promote himself and his clan up to their ranks. There was only one way to advance status of a group in human society, and that was to become first-raters who could keep up with other people at this level.

Though there was little doubt that there was a huge divide in status among first-class citizens, that was a matter that he should consider at a later date.

He first needed to get himself and his clan through the door, and right now their best hopes of getting in as quickly as possible laid with their son.

If their wonderful and beautiful baby boy could attend first-class schools and earn the appreciation of his teachers, then Marvaine would definitely be able to build up the qualifications and connections needed to gain a foothold in a first-rate state!

It didn't matter if Marvaine started out as a nobody in a first-rate state. As long as he exceeded the minimum threshold, the clan could put its full support behind him to prop him up and help him get over the roughest part of his early career as a professional!

This could be an incredible win-win solution.

Marvaine would be able to become a first-class mech designer without needing to indenture himself to existing first-class institutions.

Ves and Gloriana would finally be able to fulfill one of their lifelong dreams and meet all of the requirements to begin designing and selling first-class mechs for an entirely different clientele!

Though Ves was confident that he would have been able to enter the first-class mech industry by himself sooner rather than later, it would be a lot harder and more time-consuming for him to do so due to many reasons.

Ves looked hungrily at his son. If Marvaine performed up to his potential and passed all of his courses, then it would only take around two decades for him to become a genuine first-class mech designer!

Once that happened, Ves and his wife would also be able to first-class mech designers by hitchhiking off their talented boy's successful foothold into an industry cluster that was notoriously discriminatory and difficult to enter for 'lesser mech designers'!

It was best if his son was able to impress and get apprenticed by one of the prestigious Masters who taught at a first-class mech design university.



It didn't even have to be a particularly good and renowned university. Even the average ones built up extensive alumni networks that effectively bound many different corporations to an informal alliance!

All of these considerations made it more important than ever for his parents to plan out a trajectory for his future.

Perhaps it was callous to treat their own offspring as an easy springboard into first-class mech design, but Ves and Gloriana were so obsessed with it that they didn't put much thought into whether Marvaine might want to pursue a different course in life!

Since a discussion on Marvaine's schooling obviously required a lot of research and decision-making, the couple decided to defer this matter to later.

For now, they wanted to make sure that their boy did not lose his pure and innocent fascination for mech design and fall behind in his early studies.

As a passionate mech designer himself, Ves understood deeply that many people in his profession were heavily leaning onto the fancies they developed in their childhoods.

Every mech designer was essentially a kid at heart. In his experience, it was much harder for mech designers to become successful in the mech industry if this powerful motivating force wasn't able to push them forward.

"Marvaine?"

"Yes, papa?"

"Come over here please. Your mother and I have made a few decisions."

"Okay."

The young boy scurried over to his parents and automatically jumped into the arms of his mother. Pure love flowed between the three of them as their bonds of family became strong.

"We are so proud of you, do you know that?" Gloriana said in a mothering tone. "You're a good boy. The smarter you become, the more we are happy with you. You've performed so well today."

"Thank you, mama. I'm tired."

"I know, my dear. You've played more than enough for one day. Still, would you like to play with Mekano again tomorrow?"

Marvaine paused for a moment before nodding. "I can still make many more awesome Mekanos!"

Both Ves and Gloriana smiled. That was exactly what they wanted to hear.

"Your mother and I would love for you to get invested in Mekano." Ves spoke to him. "It's a fun game that your mother enjoyed for many years back when she was younger. It can be a fun game for you as well, and it can also help you learn about some of the principles and working methods of our profession in advance. In short, you get to kill two birds with one stone by learning how to do our jobs and have fun in the process!"

"I don't want to kill a bird." Marvaine said in his cute little voice. "Let alone two."

Gloriana smiled. "It is just an antiquated figure of speech, Marvaine. In any case, while your father and I want you to enjoy playing with Mekano, we don't want you to put together different mech parts without aim. Mekano is a game as well as an invaluable learning tool, so it would be too wasteful if you only care about the former."

"We have decided to implement an incentive scheme to reward you and encourage you for making measurable progress in your Mekano design work." Ves announced. "The more you learn and the better your results, the more you are permitted to do with Mekano. It would also make us a lot happier if we see you doing well."

Gloriana gestured towards the latest Mekano that he had just made. The little miniature mech was an impressive feat of construction from a boy of his tender age!

"While we are impressed by the fact that you managed to put together such a complicated machine, Level 4 is still too much for you. We have decided that you should stick to Level 3 Mekanos for now and learn how to design more optimal and less obviously flawed machines first."

Their son immediately grew disappointed. "Awww."

"Don't complain, Marvaine." She admonished him. "You have skipped over too many lessons. In order to make sure you develop a proper foundation, I will judge every Mekanos that you make for their quality, their viability, their realism and most importantly their flaws. It is only once the performance of your Mekanos meets the standards that I have set for you that I will unlock the next level of your Mekano Sets. Then you will have to do it all over again if you want to move even further, do you understand?"

Their little boy was smart enough to understand and follow this arrangement.

"I do, mama. I have to make better Mekanos to make you happy."

"That's right, Marvaine!"

"Ahem." Ves coughed. "Quality shouldn't be the only goal you should strive towards. There are boring designs and interesting designs. If you want to become successful in the mech industry one day, you cannot stick to tried-and-true formulas. You need to walk off the beaten track and develop a design philosophy and associated mechs that are unique, original and interesting."

"What do I need to do, papa?"

Ves grinned in response. "I want you to have fun. Don't treat this purely as a chore. Go ahead and use your active imagination to your advantage. When

you think about what sort of Mekanos you want to develop next, you should start developing the habit of exercising your creativity. Think about making a fairly normal mech that is common in human space, but try to figure out a way to put a twist on it that makes it better than normal. It doesn't matter if you succeed or fail as long as the concept is promising enough."

His son furrowed his brows. "How do I know a Mekanos is good enough?"

"I will help with that by providing my feedback on your work." Ves answered. "I will judge your Mekanos on the originality and creativity of your design concepts. I will also judge them on their commercial viability and how well they are able to stand out in the mech market. This means figuring out how well your work will sell if it is converted into a full-sized commercial mech model. The more interesting your Mekanos, the better."

"What will I get if I do well?"

"If you prove to me that you have made excellent use of all of the variety of options that a Mekano Set can offer to you, I will give you access to another Mekano Set. For now, we will only allow you to make use of the My First Mech Set, but if you have developed enough interesting Mekanos, I will let you unlock the Basic Ranged Mech Set or the Basic Melee Mech Set next!"

Too much choice could be overwhelming to a little kid. Ves didn't want Marvaine to take all of the options for granted, so he had changed his mind about the birthday present and withhold the other four Mekano Sets for the time being.

#### **Chapter 4559 Student Pipelines**

Ves felt as if he was treating Marvaine as an employee rather than his son.

Setting up such a formal and rule-bound incentive structure smacked of manipulative behavior.

It was the kind of approach that a heartless results-driven boss imposed on their underlings to ensure that they remained productive and helpful to the company.

Though Ves possessed enough awareness to recognize that he was acting a bit too much like Gloriana than he was comfortable with, he couldn't help it. Marvaine had so much talent that he couldn't bear the thought that his son would grow up as less than the sum of his parts!

He distinctly recalled one of his distant Mastery experiences where he had landed in the mind of a certain drug-addled, good-for-nothing scion of the Streon Clan of the Greater Terran United Confederation.

That bastard of a hedonist had access to so much wealth, privilege and chances to make himself great, but practically wasted all of it in favor of drugging himself stupid all day!

Though the former wastrel had finally managed to clean up his act and become a bigshot among the Terrans, that was only because Ves essentially forced the idiot to change his entire life trajectory by force.

If even first-raters could turn into useless good-for-nothing leeches, then there was always a possibility that his own children could end up the same way!

This was why he did not completely object to Gloriana's demanding child rearing methods. The Hexers may be deplorable people who maintained a lot of awful customs and beliefs, but if there was one thing they were good at, it was raising children into proper, obedient and effective adults!

Right now, Ves played along with his wife because he really didn't want his son to come anywhere close to the original Axelar. If that meant he had to cross a line or two, then so be it. He vastly preferred to raise Marvaine into a clone of Gloriana than a mediocre adolescent who wasn't good enough to stand out in any particular field.

Once Ves and Gloriana explained the new Mekano incentive structure to Marvaine, the little boy became eager to prove himself and unlock access to the greater possibilities of Mekano!

"I want to unlock all of the sets!" Marvaine exclaimed.

Ves patted his son on the head. "Don't be in a hurry. The starter set may be a little boring, but a professional mech designer such as myself can easily design thousands of distinctive Mekanos with the available collection of parts. You don't have to make that many Mekanos, but you must show me that you are able to fully utilize the available parts."

"Awww..."

Hours later, the kids already ate their meals and were ready to go to bed. Ves and Gloriana visited each of their children's bedrooms and tucked them all to sleep with all of the love and care they could summon.

Once their son and daughters fell into slumber, the two parents sat on the couch in the living room.

Gloriana had already done her homework beforehand while Ves had put his enhanced cognition to good use by rapidly absorbing all of the information he needed to get up to speed.

He possessed a much better understanding of the educational options available to talented children.

First-class schools were much more complicated to enter, especially when it came to foreigners and second-raters.

On the one hand, many first-class schools didn't even want to bother with 'lesser humans'. The discrimination against those who had risen up from the ranks of space peasants was too great.

Even if these schools made an exception and opened their doors to a particularly talented second-rater, the students and even the teachers would all exhibit horrible discriminatory behavior towards a person who did not fit into their group.

Ves had read enough horror stories about these cases on the galactic net that he decided to never subject his children to such difficult ordeals.

"That is why we need to limit our consideration to the more accessible, broader and more open-minded schools." Gloriana explained. "They also have to be multicultural and deliberately targeted towards foreigners. This way, Marvaine will have the same status as much of his future classmates."

"You're right, but... I've read the entry requirements for those open schools. They are much more demanding than usual. Not only will Marvaine have to produce consistently high results in order to avoid getting kicked from attendance, we will also have to pay a lot more tuition fees. The problem only exacerbates when we want to put him into a virtual school!"

His wife sighed. "It can't be helped. Physical schools have a lower number of applicants because of geographic restrictions. Virtual schools are not subject to these limitations, so anyone with a connection to the galactic net can apply, which means the demand is enormous. Furthermore, the difficulty of teaching students in virtual reality is much greater as the students cannot access highly sophisticated school facilities, so the quality of the lessons will inevitably be inferior."

Parents who wanted to enroll their kids to a virtual school had to make many tradeoffs in order to take advantage of this single convenience.

There were downsides to the virtual school as well. There was always a sense of physical detachment. The pupils never set foot onto the physical grounds of the education institution in person. They never even met any of their

classmates in real life. This meant that once they graduated, they often went their separate ways. The friendships and alumni networks of these virtual schools were simply inadequate compared to their equivalents at physical institutions.

The fact of the matter was that Ves and Gloriana could give Marvaine much better career opportunities if they enrolled him into a reputable first-class school in the Zelmar Upper Zone.

They had even looked up a few that were both open to foreigners and happy to enroll a young genius like Marvaine!

They never seriously considered this matter, though.

"Marvaine is family. Our family." Ves emphasized. "What is the point of having a son and becoming a parent when I don't even get to experience the joys and difficulties of fatherhood? This is an essential part to any person's life and I will not give it up in the name of expediency."

Gloriana nodded her head as she leaned against her husband's shoulder. "I agree. There is another reason why we should be wary of these schools. They are not altruistic institutions, Ves. Even the non-profit ones are much more profit-driven than you realize. They merely count wealth in how many alumni they have managed to turn into their unwitting servants rather than cold hard cash. The greater their networks, the greater their influence and power. It just isn't as obvious on the surface."

"The boarding schools are especially the worst." Ves contemptuously added. "Once you send a child to a far-off boarding school, you are essentially allowing complete strangers with agendas of their own to indoctrinate their young and impressionable pupils with any nonsense they like. I don't want Marvaine to go away for four or so years only to come back as a loyal



Rubarthan citizen who admires the Star Emperor more than his own father and mother!"

While boarding schools definitely had their uses, none of them applied to their current situation, so the couple readily dismissed all of these possibilities.

This meant that virtual schools became their only viable choice.

Fortunately, there were plenty of acceptable primary and tertiary educational institutions available that offered virtual schooling.

Most of them were extensions or branches of renowned and successful physical schools with long and storied heritages. This granted them a lot of trust and legitimacy. They were also highly entrenched and possessed lots of connections to many friendly and supportive states and companies.

The problem was that most of these virtual schooling options disappeared when it came to tertiary educational institutions.

Ves frowned when he thought about this notable shortcoming. "There are too few universities that offer virtual schooling, and the few that do are insanely expensive while producing vastly inferior results."

"That is because this is where adolescents are being molded into professionals." Gloriana explained to him. "Primary schools and secondary schools do not care too much because their students will still be students when they graduate at the end. It is different for universities because they are responsible for the most important stages of helping their attendees grow up into productive and useful members of society."

While Ves had seen sources where virtual schooling at the university level could still produce respectable results, it simply wasn't a good option for Marvaine. Teachers who taught in those classes largely went through the motions and rarely exhibited any initiative.

Networking became more important than ever at this stage. The inability to form strong friendships and relations with talented students and influential professors would hamper Marvaine's chances of entering the first-class mech industry.

As much as they disliked it, the couple had no choice but to compromise on their original goal of keeping their precious son close.

"We'll have to send our son off to a physical first-class mech design university." Ves concluded. "Doing anything else would be a disservice to his excellent talent and growing capabilities. I suppose we can raise him ourselves, but Marvaine would be missing out on too many benefits."

Both Ves and Gloriana already had experience with teaching mech design students in-house.

They largely turned out well. Maikel, Zanthar, Maisie Ann and Rennie Larkinson had all become Apprentice Mech Designers that were distinctly more successful than their peers.

If they continued to practice their skills and conduct helpful research, they might advance to the rank of Journeyman Mech Designer in the next few decades.

While that sounded fairly good, they did not come close to matching the impressive capabilities of any graduate of a first-class mech design university!

It was much better to send Marvaine off by the time he graduated from a secondary virtual school.

Though Gloriana didn't like it, she didn't object to it either.

"My mother Constance did the same to me and my older siblings. The Scimitar System which the Wodin Dynasty ruled back then did not host any renowned universities, so my mother had little choice but to send us off to

better universities that are located in different star systems. This is to ensure we would get taken seriously once we have completed our studies."

By the time Marvaine was ready to complete this crucial step in his journey, he should have already reached his late teens. That was more than enough time for Ves and Gloriana to have their fill of raising their cute boy into a handsome adolescent.

While it may be incredibly premature to think about the mech design university that Marvaine should apply for, there was no way for his parents to ignore this consideration.

Ves rubbed his hairless chin. "Most primary and secondary virtual schools are attached or outright part of different mech universities. The former can be treated as in-house talent pipelines that deliver qualified, desirable and partially indoctrinated graduates to the latter."

There were many mechanisms that encouraged students to stay within the same pipeline.

Graduates of a primary school had a much easier time getting accepted into a related secondary school. They could skip a number of requirements, pay lower tuition fees and make do with lower requirements.

The same applied to graduates of a secondary school. They could get into a related university a lot easier than normal. The most high-performing ones could even enter any educational program they wanted without needing to pass any entrance exams!

The latter benefit was a crucial variable to Ves and Gloriana because the entrance exams of any reputable first-class mech design university was insanely difficult!

"Although I trust our son to be intelligent enough to pass any entrance exam, he can't do much against the informal barriers to entry." Gloriana said in a

measured tone. "If we want to ease his difficulties as much as possible, then we should select an entire pipeline instead of a single primary virtual school."

There were a lot of choices. Many of them came with massive implications, so it was not easy for Ves and Gloriana to make up their mind!

#### Chapter 4560 Open Schools

Since the amount of choice was too much, Ves thought it was useful to narrow down the list.

"The first decision we need to make is whether we want to enroll Marvaine into a Terran or Rubarthan line of schools. Say what you want about those two groups, they are still superior to the educational institutions of 'lesser' first-rate states."

Even first-raters weren't all the same.

It used to be irrelevant to make this distinction in the past because Ves was still far away from reaching this level.

Yet now that their son had a chance to enter a first-class education track right from the beginning, it became a lot more acute for Ves to learn the hierarchy and general relations of different first-rate states!

A simple analysis of this large and diverse collection of first-rate states reminded Ves of the old situation of the Komodo Star Sector.

The Greater Terran United Confederation and the New Rubarth Empire roughly corresponded to the Friday Coalition and the Hexadric Hegemony.

The two states dominated their neighborhood to the point that all of the other states could not go around the behemoths!

Every other first-rate state was essentially the equivalent of a third-rate state in the Komodo Star Sector.

There was a huge difference between attending a school in the Bright Republic and attending a school in the Friday Coalition.

While the differences became less pronounced among first-rate states, there were still noticeable differences between the schooling offered by the first-rate superstates and the more normal first-rate states such as the Yarman Republic.

It was difficult for Ves and Gloriana to decide whether they wanted their son to attend the best possible schools at the cost of exposing their boy to the powerful indoctrination of the Terrans and Rubarthans.

"The first-rate superstates are incredibly proud." Ves grimaced. "Both of them used to dominate human civilization, and they still retained the same amount of pride they had before the Big Two kicked them down a notch. The effectiveness of their brainwashing is several times better than that of weaker first-rate states. At least the citizens of the latter are realistic enough to recognize that they are not the best humans in existence."

Although Gloriana acknowledged this very real danger, she found it difficult to pass on the opportunity to give their baby access to the most prosperous and advanced mech industries outside of the MTA.

"States such as the Yarman Republic and the Omter Republic are good and all, but if our son becomes associated with these states, then he will be denied the opportunity to work with many of the best colleagues, technologies, materials and facilities accessible to our race. This won't necessarily stop his rise to the top, but he will have to spend much more time and effort to realize his design philosophy and possibly complete the next step."

That was undoubtedly true, but Ves shook his head.

"Let's not be too greedy, honey. There are several reasons why it is a bad idea to resort to the Terrans or Rubarthans. Their strong indoctrination is one

of them. What is even more important is that the first-rate superstates are essentially frenemies with the Big Two. The relations between the two power blocs aren't openly hostile, but it is still a bad idea to mix them together. I don't know if you have noticed, but we are firmly in the camp of the MTA. I am actively cooperating with the mechers on several ongoing research initiatives!"

While it was true that every mech designer had to develop an amiable relationship with the MTA, Ves took it a step further and cooperated with a couple of its factions.

This made it quite unwise to send Marvaine to a Terran or Rubarthan school. Who knew how the Terrans or the Rubarthans would take advantage of this situation to encourage Ves to distance himself from the MTA.

The mechers also wouldn't be pleased when they learned that one of their more important associates essentially sent a child to the opposite camp!

"The Larkinson Clan is technically a part of the Red Ocean Union." Ves added. "This doesn't mean much so far, but once the Terran Alliance and the Rubarthan Pact go to war against each other, we can easily get dragged into a mess outside of our will. It might even be more awkward if the Red Ocean Union enters the war as well."

His wife looked skeptical. "Surely the Terrans and the Rubarthans won't declare war against each other. Such a conflict will be exceptionally destructive. They have too much to lose. They are so evenly matched that the only winners will be the first-rate states who had nothing to do with their rivalry."

"I don't think it is that simple, Gloriana. I talked to Minister Shederin Purnesse about the possibility of future unrest and a war between the Terrans and the Rubarthans is very realistic. The most important distinction that you have to make is that the original first-rate superstates won't go to war against each

other. Instead, it will be their colonial holdings in the Red Ocean that will do the fighting. The people back in the old galaxy will either reinforce their troops in the new frontier or sit back and cheer their cousins in the new frontier."

Gloriana snorted. "Those high officials back in the old galaxy are eager to resume their grudge match against their rivals, but are too cowardly to risk their core territories and possessions. Limiting their conflict to the Red Ocean is a half-hearted choice that will probably revolve more about pride than any serious attempt to take down their adversaries."

He agreed with her assessment as well. It was unlikely for the Terrans and the Rubarthans to commit too much to any future frontier war against each other as the MTA and CFA would eagerly take advantage of the mutual weakening.

There was still a way to wage 'productive' wars. Ves was no stranger of this as the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom used to be embroiled by them in the past.

The damage would still be great, but as long as the core of the Terran Alliance and the Rubarthan Pact remained largely intact, the lessons learned and the growth experienced by all of the surviving soldiers made it worth the effort!

Still, Ves had to be careful that his clan didn't come anywhere close to the conflict zones. The little guys who had no say in the matter often suffered from the decisions of the big guys!

After a few more arguments, Gloriana reluctantly conceded that it might be best to steer away from the first-rate superstates.

They proceeded to narrow their selection of first-class school chains that were largely associated with normal first-rate states.

Many of them were originally rooted in the old galaxy, but they had already begun to set up lots of different branches in the Red Ocean.

As Gloriana browsed through all of the available choices, suddenly came up with an interesting idea.

"Wait, our fleet is currently attempting to retrieve Lord Pearian Yorul-Tavik, correct? What if we succeed in delivering him back to safety? The immense amount of gratitude that we will receive from the Yorul-Tavik Clan will effectively give us expanded access to the Omter Republic where it is rooted. Marvaine will be able to get into Omter schools much easier with the backing of the Yorul-Taviks."

That was a good suggestion! The more Ves thought about it, the more he liked it. "Assuming that we succeed in this mission, then we can request the Yorul-Tavik Clan to sponsor Marvaine's studies. This will allow us to enroll our son into better schools and reduce the chances that he will get kicked out for one reason or another. He will also be able to develop a better relationship with an excellent teacher."

People with connections simply enjoyed greater advantages than those who had no strong backing to speak of. The Omter Republic was pretty much a powerful foreign territory to the Larkinson Clan, so neither Ves nor Gloriana could exert any leverage over the institutions of the first-rate state.

Aside from that, gaining the friendship of the Yorul-Tavik Clan also made it easier for Marvaine to start his career in the territories that fell within the Omter Republic's sphere of influence!

The two parents curiously summoned up a list of Omter schools. There were many of them that were surprisingly open to accepting foreign students.

Ves quickly figured out the reason why they were more accessible than usual. "It has to do with the Omter Republic's geopolitical situation. It is a small first-rate state that sits between the two giants in the galactic center. Since the Omters want to promote trade with both the Terran Confederation and the



Rubarth Empire, they encourage students from both states to study within their schools. They also welcome talented second-raters because they truly need the help."

"The tuition fees also help." Gloriana remarked. "Since the Omter Republic is so small, it has to go out of its way to earn more revenue to support its incredibly high living standards. Turning all of its schools into profit-generating machines is a good way to increase their export earnings."

While the tuition fees were higher than Ves preferred, the Omter schools provided a lot of advantages compared to their competitors aside from the ones he already mentioned.

The Omters were perhaps the least arrogant and prideful first-raters in human space. The Omter Republic was essentially a buffer state that could easily be crushed by the massive Terran Confederation or Rubarth Empire if either of them woke up on the wrong foot.

This caused the Omters to place a high degree of importance on diplomacy and making friends.

They were much more open-minded than other first-raters and were much more willing to bend in the face of opposition.

The Omter schools also mastered or obtained access to a large diversity of high technologies. The buffer state served as a trading platform where Terrans and Rubarthans could trade all kinds of awesome products with each other through the use of local intermediaries.

This directly exposed the Omters to high technologies that were fairly strong but not to the point of having any significant strategic value.

The sheer quantity of trading that took place between the first-rate superstates meant that the Omter universities essentially accrued expansive libraries of lots of advanced technologies!

This was one of the greatest attractions to attending an Omter tertiary educational institution. Any student who gained the right permissions could study at least a few powerful technological advances that were highly relevant and compatible to their future design philosophies!

Given that Marvaine already gained an early affinity towards life due to Denny's evolution, his son might be able to study incredibly useful technological applications that synergized wonderfully with not just his own but also his father's specialty!

"The Omter Republic may be small and weak as far as first-rate states are concerned, but those are all good for us." Ves concluded. "What I find important is that there are plenty of Omter schools that are incredibly open, diverse and multicultural. Incredibly talented second-raters who originate from rich families across a wide swathe of human space all come together and learn to get along with each other as they don't have much reason to compete against each other. The local teachers and students are also much more used to hosting foreigners and are less likely to discriminate against their guests. This is one of their state's major income sources, after all. It doesn't make sense to drive all of their well-paying customers away."

The mention of the word 'customers' caused both Ves and Gloriana to frown.

This was because the tuition fees for any foreign student was high!

"Even the cheapest primary schools charge at least 1 million MTA credits for a single year!" Gloriana painfully complained. "The price is multiple times higher for the more renowned ones, and gets even worse for secondary schools. As for universities..."

It was extremely expensive to produce first-class mech designers. The barrier to entry was much higher than for universities in the lesser states.

At least the schools provided a lot of value for money. The earning potential of a reasonably competent first-class mech designer was so high that it was quite realistic for one to earn back all of that investment within a century or much sooner!

While Ves was confident that his clan's earnings would be able to grow fast enough to keep up with the escalating tuition fees for a single foreign student, it was still an incredible burden to the Larkinson Clan's finances!

"It would be best if we can secure a discount or a scholarship for Marvaine."  
He said.

Gloriana pressed her lips. "We must find Lord Pearian Yorul-Tavik. Don't let others claim him before we have homed in on his location."

"Our clan is already on it. In the meantime, we should tighten our belts and pay more attention to our spending. It would help a lot if you stop spending so much cash on handbags, for example."

"SHUT YOUR MOUTH! YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU ARE TALKING ABOUT, VES!"