

Mech 4581

Chapter 4581 Vampire Reaction

Though no one was able to make a definitive conclusion on who controlled or crewed the alien battleship, it was practically a certainty that they were not friendly towards the Golden Skull Alliance!

Ves increasingly felt that he had touched upon a profound affair that exceeded the Golden Skull Alliance's ability to interfere.

If any of the possible candidates mentioned by Chief Shipwright Vivian Tsai turned their attention to him and his clan, it would be difficult for the expeditionary fleet to escape this border region alive!

He tried his best to find how he and the rest of the Golden Skull Alliance could still find a way to take advantage of this mysterious battleship.

"I understand that the Tower of Babel can't be beaten by us through conventional means." He stated. "The battleship is too tough and her current location makes it a lot more difficult for us to mess with her. We can employ other options, though. What do you think about killing off the entire crew by employing one of our battle formation attacks?"

That caused Vivian to become a lot more thoughtful. She looked back at the schematic and tried to simulate how such an attack might affect the Tower of Babel's performance.

"That is an interesting proposition." She said. "I am not an expert in this, but it is unlikely that the Tower of Babel offers any special defenses against this so-called death energy wave. The natives of the Red Ocean will have to be aware that such attacks are possible in order to guard against them, but I have never heard of any indigenous alien race employing such exotic means of attack. That doesn't rule out the possibility that the alien battleship does have protection against one of our clan's signature attack methods, but it will definitely not be based on the orven energy shields or the human hull plating."

The only viable defense that Ves could think of was if the battleship hosted a native 'god'. If this transcendent alien leader evolved far enough, he would probably be able to resist the lethal effects of the death energy attack.

If the Larkinsons were especially unlucky, then this alien god may even be strong enough to protect much of the crew from the same effects!

"This discussion is largely moot if the Tower of Babel continues to hide within the brown dwarf star." Vivian pointed out. "None of the mechs that can release this battle formation attack will be able to stay in one piece if they get too close. It is useless to make this attempt unless you are able to extend the range of this battle formation attack."

Ves frowned. The chief shipwright was correct. Even if the failed star wasn't in the way, it was still doubtful whether the Penitent Sister and Glory Seeker mechs could even get close enough to the Tower of Babel before being torn to pieces.

He could still dream.

"Okay, I understand the difficulties. It should still be a better option than relying on our regular armaments. None of them are powerful enough to punch through the strong defensive layers of this battleship."

"You may still have a chance." Vivian suddenly raised. She pointed at the schematic. "We have gathered clues that the Tower of Babel is not in her prime condition anymore. She doesn't bear any heavy damage, but we have observed obvious traces of battle damage across the length of her hull. They are fairly light and non-critical, but it is still an obvious sign that this battleship has fought in at least one serious battle a short time ago. In addition to that, parking inside the atmosphere of a brown dwarf star is bound to exert considerable pressure on her defensive systems. Her energy shield

generators are most certainly straining while her hull plating must also be affected."

That was good to know, but it didn't look as if the Tower of Babel was creaking.

Ves and Vivian talked a bit more about the hybrid battleship. It was a good sign that she was alone, but they could not completely rule out the possibility that there were other associated vessels lurking in a place that was beyond the range of detection of the expeditionary fleet.

When Ves felt that he had learned everything he could from the Naval Design Department, he stood up and prepared to depart.

"Thank you for sharing your insights with me, Vivian. Our discussion has been fruitful. Keep analyzing the Tower of Babel and make sure to transmit any critical discoveries to me. I will tell my comm to pay attention to your messages."

The woman raised her hand. "There is one more thing, sir."

"Hm?"

"We can't defeat the Tower of Babel, but we don't necessarily have to." She said. "Our original goal was to rescue Lord Pearian Yorul-Tavik. If we can open up a gap in the alien battleship's defenses and sneak an infiltration team aboard the ship, then we might have a shot of completing our main goal."

For all of his thinking about this weird alien warship, Ves had lost sight of the purpose of this entire trip. He had become too obsessed with defeating the Tower of Babel that he had missed this basic truth.

"Ah. Thank you for reminding me of that. Still, it is a moot point as you have said. DIVA's stealth shuttles are too fragile to enter the brown dwarf star. The

Glory Seekers are still in the process of fixing the damage they incurred while delivering the probes."

The Black Cats had stealth shuttles as well, but they weren't as effective as that of DIVA. Ves didn't trust his own tech to sneak up to such an advanced alien battleship unnoticed.

Since Vivian had nothing more to say, Ves bid goodbye to her and returned to his shuttle.

As the craft left the embrace of the Diligent Ovenbird and steadily flew back to the Spirit of Bentheim, he went back to thinking about how he would be able to gain any advantages in this difficult situation.

He needed to figure out whether spiritual attacks could affect the crew of the Tower of Babel. If all it took to render a battleship inoperable was to run a death energy wave attack through her hull, then he might be able to finagle an unlikely victory out of any lopsided engagement.

"Helena." He spoke while concentrating on his 'sister'.

"You called, little bro?"

The honor guards in the shuttle didn't show much of a reaction to Helena's appearance. They had become so accustomed to the manifestations of design spirits that they only maintained normal vigilance.

The design spirit playfully sat on a nearby seat. She fiddled with the Black Lotus that Ves had gifted her in celebration of her birth.

"I need your input on a few possible scenarios." Ves spoke as he immediately turned to business. "I want to explore the possibility of using your power to wipe out all hostiles stationed aboard that alien battleship that is keeping us busy."

"I am familiar with the ship you're talking about. Plenty of the mech pilots in this fleet are thinking about her. She is quite a formidable vessel."

"That's for sure. By the way, are you able to investigate the ship more directly? I tried asking Ylvaine on what he is able to figure out about the ship, but he can't give much details."

"I'm not surprised." Helena replied. "I can't help you much, Ves. First, there is nothing related to me over there. Even if you bring aspect of me close to that ship, I still wouldn't be able to do much."

"Why not?"

"There are several reasons. The first is that I can sense that there is at least one powerful individual aboard that ship. The second is that the ship is inside a star."

"It's not a real star." Ves corrected his spiritual sister. "A brown dwarf star is merely an oversized gas giant that generates a relatively low amount of heat and radiation."

Helena huffed. "The distinction is not important. It is conceptually a star or at least a very hot planet, and that means it is associated with positive energy. While much of the heat and radiation it produces is only relevant to the material realm, it has definite weight in the other realm, especially when you are practically on top of the star."

"And that means..."

"I can't get close." She admitted while emphatically patting her black dress. "I don't dress like this for no reason. I'm following a theme. My existence and element is centered around death, which predictably falls into the category of negative energy. Stars and anything related to heat or fire are associated with positive energy. The two categories generally don't get along with each other."

Ves didn't know that. He had no idea that stars were powerful enough to repel Helena! The implications of this revelation were great!

"If that is the case, then a battle formation attack or a death energy beam attack from the Gray Lotus won't do anything to the ship that we are calling the Tower of Babel?"

"I am not kidding, brother. I am much more at home in dark, cold places like the Nyxian Gap. Someone like you might find it to be a horrible, lifeless place, but it is the opposite to me. All of the death and negative energy concentrated over there is paradise to me. It was the reason why our mother was able to bring me to life in the first place, and it is also the best growth environment for me. Stars are the polar opposite to me. I may not be a vampire, but I truly do not want to get too close to such a large source of positive energy."

"I see..."

That pretty much put an end to most of his ideas.

Helena leaned over and patted his head. "Hey, don't look so glum, little brother. I can still lend a hand under the right circumstances. If you can find a way to lure that alien ship out of the brown dwarf star, I might be able to affect it, if only partially. The further away she is from the star, the greater my ability to affect life aboard the ship."

That returned a bit of hope to him, but he soon thought of another complication.

"Wait, there is at least one human individual aboard that ship that must not be slain." He said. "It is really important to us that Lord Pearian Yorul-Tavik remains alive at the end. Can you make it so that any attack based on your death energy will not accidentally harvest his life?"

Helena looked pensive. "I... don't know. Theoretically, it should be possible, but I haven't practiced my control very much."

"What? You don't even have a filter for your power?"

"Hey! My fights typically devolve into contests of power! Brute force is much more important than fine control. I can try and practice my control in order to prevent specific people from succumbing to my power, but you will have to trust me to get it right."

"I appreciate... the effort."

It appeared that Ves wouldn't get anything better than that. Ves kept this option in mind but resolved not to rely too much on it. He at least needed to find where Lord Pearian Yorul-Tavik was being held inside the ship so that any potential death energy attack might bypass that specific section.

He continued to chat a bit more with Helena, but she didn't stick around for long.

She leaned over and kissed his cheek. "Call me when you need my help. I am always here for you. We're family, after all. If you want to do anything special, then maybe think about employing your other design spirits. There are a few of them that won't get strongly affected by the positive energy of the brown dwarf star. This is my suggestion."

Perhaps she had a good point.

Chapter 4582 Discouraged

Ves kept thinking about what his sister told him. He never realized that stars could affect spirituality.

There was something more about them than he initially thought.

"Are stars alive?"

Normally, that shouldn't be possible. Similar to planets, stars were just extremely large concentrations of matter. They tended to gather so much mass in a small area that the gravity generated from it tended to collapse all of

that junk into itself, which initiated and sustained a lot of different physical processes.

Even so, Helena claimed that the immense heat and other energies generated by something as big as a hypergiant to something as small as a brown dwarf also affected the imaginary realm.

"Does this apply to any physical process that generates energy?" Ves wondered.

That didn't make any sense. The battle formation attacks based on death energy wouldn't have been able to sweep through so many mechs and warships while encountering virtually no resistance. Each of these two machines ran on juice produced by extremely potent power reactors and power generators.

"It could be that they do have an effect, but it is just too weak to matter." He guessed.

This was a more plausible theory. It was just like gravity. A mech or a starship technically curved spacetime to a slight degree, which meant that they actually generated their own gravity.

It was just that the forces of gravity in question were so infinitesimally trivial that not even an ant would get attracted!

As powerful these energy generating sources had become over the years, they were still far short of matching the titanic output of stars that were many times bigger than entire planets!

In the end, Ves lacked the data and the theoretical background to make any further conclusions about this subject. He could only accept Helena's claim without really being able to test and verify it through his own experiments.

For a moment, he felt as if he had touched a corner to a much greater theory about life, reality and power.

Then, he remembered his current situation, which was anything but ideal. Any thoughts about trying to observe how different spiritual phenomena behaved in close proximity to a star had to wait until he resolved his more immediate affairs.

"Positive energy, huh?"

Since physical means of infiltrating and affecting the Tower of Babel had no chance of working, Ves had fewer ways to assail it. He needed to employ unorthodox methods to break open such a powerful warship.

Once he returned his flagship, he continued to puzzle over this matter together with many other people.

The probes continued to observe the alien battleship, yet their sensors could only do so much. The analysts hadn't been able to figure out any further details that were important enough to change the game.

People increasingly became less productive as a response. They had already formulated a few basic plans but could go no further because there simply weren't any openings to exploit.

Seeing that no one was making any progress, Ves called for another leadership meeting.

This time he invited everyone to shuttle over to the Spirit of Bentheim so that he could talk to everyone important in person.

Numerous people who were stationed across the fleet converged upon the factory ship with the impressive prow that was shaped into the head of the Golden Cat.

The only major figure who hadn't been invited to the meeting was Patriarch Reginald Cross.

He needed to remain on standby with his Mars in case the Tower of Babel rapidly moved into action.

Besides, his powerful and domineering domain was far too eager to bend the minds of other people. It was best not to directly subject ordinary people to his influence.

While both of these reasons were valid, Ves actually had a more important reason why he wanted to keep Patriarch Reginald away from the decision-making table.

The ace pilot probably wouldn't like the decisions that they were about to make in the formal conference room.

Minister Shederin looked pensive as he stood in front of Ves. "Patriarch Reginald's demands have always been clear. He is eager for a challenge and does not respond well to being denied. Are you sure you wish to proceed with your current intentions?"

"Patriarch Reginald may be a crucial protector to us, but he should know that we will not cater to his every demand. The logic to avoid a head-on collision is clear. Even a dummy like him should be able to understand how vulnerable we are by ourselves. Besides, it is not as if I am denying him every possible opportunity to fight a glorious battle. Hopefully the rest of the Cross Clan will see reason."

Shederin Purnesse smiled. "Patriarch Reginald has dispatched Venerable Linda Cross to serve as his voice."

"I heard."

"Venerable Linda is known as one of the calmer and more composed members of the Cross Clan. She is a veteran who has lived through the initial downfall and flight of her clan. She should be much more understanding of our reasoning and our arguments."

Ves looked intrigued. "Do you think she will play along?"

"What I think is that Patriarch Reginald may have already foreseen the purpose of this meeting." The minister explained. "While he does not support it, he has access to much of the same information as us. Whatever rationality he has retained should tell him that it is best to avoid an open engagement. The problem is that he cannot bring himself to adopt this stance. It would not only contradict his strong desire for combat, but also damage his image and public persona of an unrelenting duelist and champion."

"I see. I get what you mean, Shederin. It would have been much more straightforward for Patriarch Reginald to just say it outright, but I guess we should take what we can get. All I care about right now is saving us from a preventable disaster."

People continued to enter the conference room and chat with each other. It had been months since some of them had met others in person, so this was a nice opportunity to catch up and talk in a more intimate setting.

Fifteen minutes later, everyone took their seats. Ves commenced the meeting himself by summarizing the current situation.

"As you can see, there are at least two significant threats." He said as he pointed at the central projection. "As this star map shows, we are currently residing in the same star system as a first-class alien battleship that is at least as powerful as the V'gahnt-Zezne. If that is not bad enough, there are guests on the way in the form of a sizable fleet hailing from Cenatus Prospecting."

Everyone already knew this, but by mentioning these basic facts again, Ves deliberately emphasized the precarious situation of the expeditionary fleet.

He continued his explanation. "Both of these parties are hostile towards us. The ship codenamed the Tower of Babel is hostile towards all humans, and would have probably attacked us already if she isn't concerned with exposing her location. The fleet under the command of the notorious Mr. Otrus Magrin is also hostile towards us. It had already shown signs of targeting us, but the recent sabotage action has ensured that its volatile leader has developed a deep grudge against our alliance. That said, the vulture fleet is unlikely to attack us directly once it arrives due to its lack of a numerical advantage."

Everyone looked grave. No one wanted to be stalked by vultures.

Minister Shederin attempted to lighten the atmosphere. "The only saving grace we have is that the aliens in charge of the Tower of Babel and Mr. Magrin are unlikely to cooperate with each other."

That still didn't help that much. Just the Tower of Babel alone could easily crush the expeditionary fleet in battle, especially if the alien battleship was able to fight at long range.

Ves grimaced. "Both Mr. Magrin and us are pioneers. We have pledged an oath to the Big Two to serve the common interests of humanity. This means that the right course of action is to set aside any animosity that exists and combine our strengths so that we can have a better chance at eliminating a powerful alien force."

Marshal Ariadne Wodin snorted. "That is extremely unlikely to happen. Mr. Magrin is more likely to stab us in the back than to stand side by side."

"The Red Ocean is a dwarf galaxy where might makes right." Master Benedict Cortez concurred. "Oaths and promises mean little when the enforcers of the Big Two have been stretched to breaking point."

"So what do you propose, Patriarch Ves?" Venerable Linda Cross spoke up for the first time. "It sounds to me that you are much less eager to be proactive than before."

"The reason why I encouraged everyone to travel to this star system was because I thought we possessed the strength to handle any difficulties that we might encounter." Ves replied. "That is not the case anymore. The information that we have managed to gather from our scouting actions have made it clear that our main objective is too well-protected. Do you truly think we have the means to defeat the Tower of Babel or rescue Lord Pearian Yorul-Tavik?"

No one was able to come up with any valid reasoning. They all understood their own strengths well to know that they could do little against a powerful alien battleship.

Ves let out a deep breath. "Given this untenable situation, there comes a time where we just have to... let go. There is no harm in giving up. At most, we have wasted a lot of time and made a lot of unnecessary movements. Although it is painful for us to abandon a venture when we have not completed it, our lives and the integrity of our fleet is more important than any profit that we can gain from attacking the Tower of Babel. Let's leave this star system and put any thoughts about attacking the alien battleship when she still retains a lot of combat power."

Though his words sounded heavy, no one really objected to his suggestion. More than half of them even felt relieved. None of them were eager to test their mettle against such a powerful opponent.

"So we are just going to pack up our bags and leave?" Venerable Linda Cross asked on behalf of her patriarch. "We're not going to try anything to create an opening and find a way to exploit the weaknesses of the Tower of Babel?"

"I did not say that. I have not given up on rescuing Lord Pearian Yorul-Tavik. While we should obviously rule out a direct assault against the alien battleship, there are other ways to make her vulnerable."

That confused a lot of people.

"Aren't you contradicting yourself, Ves?" Marshal Ariande looked confused. "In one moment, you are telling us to leave this star system so that we can distance ourselves from a powerful alien threat. In the next moment, you are telling us that you still plan to harm the Tower of Babel."

Ves grinned at the Hexer leader. "Who says we need to be in the same star system to damage the alien battleship? We can fulfill this goal without being physically present as long as we employ a bit of trickery. The most obvious way of doing that is to force a confrontation between the Tower of Babel and the Cenatus Prospecting fleet. So long as our ships are no longer in this star system, neither of the two will be able to gang up on us. They can only target each other!"

Several people looked thoughtful, but others did not look optimistic.

"I seriously doubt that Mr. Magrin will allow himself to get ambushed like this." Master Benedict Cortez spoke. "If he and his forces have any sense, they will never take the initiative to provoke the Tower of Babel. They will try and run as fast as possible. The same goes for the Tower of Babel. There is a significant chance that she will flee from this star system without attacking any human fleets upon discovery."

"You are not wrong, Master Benedict. However, I think I can come up with a few ways to ensure that the two parties will come to blows against each other."

Ves slowly began to grin.

Chapter 4583 Unconvinced

The expeditionary fleet was leaving the star system.

Ves did not even want to wait for the arrival of the Cenatus Prospect fleet and exchange words with Mr. Magrin. He saw no purpose in doing so and it was much more likely that he would incriminate himself during any heated conversations.

A lot of people in the Golden Skull Alliance held mixed opinions about the abrupt departure.

After all of this effort and buildup, the decision to turn tail and run away when they had come so awfully close to their main objective was frustrating!

The Larkinsons were not accustomed to losing. Sure, they had suffered their fair share of setbacks, but it had been many years that they had suffered a defeat of this magnitude.

There was nothing worse than losing a battle before it had even begun!

The dip in morale was obvious among the more battle-hungry members of the Larkinson Clan.

Their previous successes had caused them to gain so much confidence in their ability to overcome more powerful foes that they thought that they still had a shot of defeating the Tower of Babel!

Of course, the cooler heads among the Larkinsons clearly understood the danger of attacking one opponent while another potential enemy was about to arrive in the star system.

Even if the Golden Skull Alliance could neutralize the Tower of Babel by relying on its own efforts, there was no way it was a good idea to do so with a vulture fleet hovering in the background!

It was too bad that there were a bit too many Larkinsons who failed to understand this logic.

"Oh, come on! Why are we running so soon?!" Venerable Rosa Orfan complained as she kicked her boot against the bulkhead. "That battleship might look scary, but we have beaten warships before, right?!"

"That is different, Rosa." Commander Casella Ingvar calmly retorted. "The only reason why we managed to defeat the orven battleship and the unclean whale that popped up afterwards was because we had seven ace mechs on our side. We only have one left. Even if the Tower of Babel is several times smaller, she is not a vessel that we can threaten with the combined power of the Mars along with the rest of us. The caliber of most of our mech weapons are simply too small and weak."

Venerable Joshua looked confused. "That doesn't matter as long as we have enough guns, right? In the last battle, most of us were locked into battle against cannon fodder. This time is different because the enemy ship is alone. We can concentrate all of our firepower against her defenses. Her energy shields might hold on for a time, but they will definitely get drained after withstanding millions of attacks."

"That may or may not be true." Casella replied. "The Tower of Babel is ostensibly equipped with orven energy shield generators, but the difference here is that they are more modern. They will be able to block many more attacks, especially when they have to cover much less volume. The alien battleship's thin profile will make it much harder for us to strike the ship when she is maneuvering at her full capabilities."

"We have many means to drain energy shields quickly. Once we fire thousands of disruptor beams at a time, there is no way all of those fancy transphasic energy shields will hold out forever!"

The Sentinel Commander shook her head. "That may be true, but then we will have to overcome the first-class hull plating that is protecting the interior of the Tower of Babel. The properties of physical protection make it so that all of those thick layers of alloy are much more effective at blocking the attacks of smaller caliber weapons. Aside from ace mechs, only cruiser-class warships and above have the requisite firepower to break open her exterior plating."

This was the reason why humanity favored armor over energy shields. The latter absorbed the full damage inflicted by any attack no matter how little damage it inflicted.

When hundreds of thousands of mechs converged upon a single target, even a CFA battleship's energy shields might get exhausted due to the sheer quantity of damage they withstood!

However, if the CFA battleship had to rely on her thick hull plating and any other physical armor solutions, she could easily bathe in the attacks of mechs all day due to how effective they were at bouncing or absorbing all of the incoming attacks!

"The Tower of Babel is not a battleship that is designed to fight against warships alone." Venerable Davia Stark concluded in her quiet voice. "The Red Ocean aliens are starting to take human mechs more seriously. Solid alloys are much better at resisting large quantities of sub-warship weapon attacks. I am not even sure whether my Amaranto with the Instrument of Doom can penetrate through all of those layers. Even her weak points are too well-protected."

All of this didn't even take into account the immense difficulty of attacking a warship that was submerged within a brown dwarf star. Many mechs couldn't even get too close to the stellar object because they couldn't handle the hostile environmental forces.

The unrest among the Larkinsons quickly subsided as enough people became convinced by the excessive risks of confronting the Tower of Babel. No matter what, they could dismiss the awesome power of a genuine warship.

That didn't mean the Golden Skull Alliance truly gave up on its mission and directly abandoned the Ramage Repulsor System.

A couple of shuttles flew out to add a few farewell gifts in different parts of space. A number of combat carriers had also been dispatched to different parts of the star system in order to plant a host of expensive observation devices.

No matter what, Ves at least wanted to know what was going on in the brown dwarf star system after the expeditionary fleet moved to another destination.

Depending on what exactly took place in the following days, Ves and the other leaders of the Golden Skull Alliance could either opt to return to the Ramage Repulsor System or keep running away as fast as possible!

When Gloriana learned of the dubious scheme that Ves had hatched this time, she couldn't help but cast doubt on this dubious venture.

"Your entire plan rests on the assumption that you can force both of our enemies to lock horns with each other as opposed to targeting us first. This might work if they are unaware of our existence, but that is not the case. We have already shown ourselves. Do you truly think they will be stupid enough to ignore an extra variable?"

"Don't worry, honey. I have it all figured out. They won't care about us after they have received my little surprises."

His wife still looked unconvinced. "Otrus Magrin is an experienced vulture. He has experienced ambushes in the past. How will you be able to convince him to commit his forces to a ruinous battle against an alien battleship when he can simply run away just as we have done?"

"His fleet is about to arrive in this star system." Ves pointed out. "Once it does, most of its starships will be forced to cycle their FTL drives. While we can expect that many if not all of this fleet's capital ships to possess a spare drive, Mr. Magrin will still have to make a choice whether he is willing to abandon all of his sub-capital ships that aren't important enough to carry redundant drives."

"That still leaves him with the core of his fleet, Ves. Sure, it will be a lot less threatening than before, but whatever Cenatus Prospecting has left behind won't be able to deal any significant damage against the Tower of Babel."

He grinned. "That is why I not only have to give him a reason to avoid a hasty evacuation from the star system, but also give him a reason to send his entire fleet closer to the brown dwarf star. Remember, neither he nor any of his men know that there is a formidable, intact alien battleship lurking inside that star. The Tower of Babel is so well-hidden that not even the Unrelenting should be able to detect any traces. At most, Saint Neville Magrin will detect something amiss as his fleet gets closer, but by then it will be too late to run."

His wife looked closely into his eyes. "Very well. I will trust you on this. You were always good at manipulating people, and you have an entire staff backing you up. There should be at least one clever person in your team who can figure out a reliable way to lure a rival pioneering fleet deeper into the star system. This is only half of the job. What about the Tower of Babel?"

"I will use another lure to encourage the commanders in charge of her to go out of the brown dwarf star and attack Otrus Magrin's fleet."

"HOW?! Aliens are much different from humans, Ves! They don't think like we do! They don't hold our values and are not motivated by the same incentives. You can't even implement a strategy that is specifically tailored to a single alien race as the identity of the alien leader is unclear. A stratagem that works

against an orven won't necessarily be effective against a puelmer or a nunser. It might even have the opposite effect for all we know."

Ves smirked. "That's a problem, to be sure, but not an insurmountable one. I have already taken this variable into account. You see, aliens may be different from humans and each other, but they still share a few common traits. They possess desires. They desire to live, they desire to procreate, they desire to win and they desire to harm their enemies. Most of the major alien races of the Red Ocean all share these desires, so all I need to do is pick a number of them and provide bait that is attractive enough to invoke them. Unless the alien commander is a non-sentient AI, I do not believe he will remain unmoved by the temptation!"

"She."

"Pardon?"

"The alien commander could be female."

Ves rolled his eyes. "Whatever. Anyway, my point is that I have formed those doubts as well but managed to come up with answers for each of them. Besides, even if all of this ends up doing nothing, we won't necessarily lose anything. This is a gambit that won't cost us anything meaningful if it ends up falling flat."

The only cost the Golden Skull Alliance needed to pay was the lost opportunity cost of abandoning any attempt to rescue Lord Pearian Yorul-Tavik, but even then he had a fallback option in mind.

Ves had already agreed with Marshal Ariadne Wodin and Master Benedict Cortez that if they gave up on this mission entirely, they would just contact the Yorul-Tavik Clan directly and sell crucial information of their missing scion's whereabouts.

The payment wouldn't be as great, but once the worrying Yorul-Taviks successfully rescued their pioneer with a sufficiently powerful mech force, they would definitely see the Golden Skull Alliance in a better light!

It shouldn't be too difficult to cash in a small favor to give his son Marvaine more support while he was attending a first-class virtual school.

"What have you done to attract the attention of the vulture fleet and alien battleship?" Gloriana asked. "You haven't told me anything about the bait that you have cast into space."

"That is on purpose, honey. I don't want to divulge any more information than necessary. A few of them are a bit... sensitive. It would be a bad idea if word got around."

"I can keep a secret!"

"Uh huh. This operation is supposed to be confidential, Gloriana. Only a small group of people know the full story as they have helped me formulate my plan."

Gloriana grew angry at him. "I am your wife, Ves!"

"So?"

Chapter 4584 Lost Race

The expeditionary fleet approached one of the few Langrange points in this nearly empty star system transitioned into FTL travel without any surprises.

The Tower of Babel never responded and maintained a stable position inside the brown dwarf star.

Perhaps the aliens who operated the battleship never detected the human fleet from the beginning.

Perhaps they did notice the presence of the expeditionary fleet, but thought that it was better to lay low rather than confront the new arrivals.

Whatever the case, Ves and many other people relaxed. It was highly unlikely that the Tower of Babel possessed the capability to intercept ships in FTL travel. That was one of the core secrets of the Big Two and a major reason why they could keep most of humanity in check.

In any case, the Golden Skull Alliance had made its move. Now it had to wait for the results.

If all went well, the Tower of Babel and the vulture fleet would both take their respective bait and confront each other in battle.

If that didn't happen, then Ves would be put in an awkward position.

"Oh well. At least I tried."

He was confident that it would work out somehow. Ves was confident in his ability to anticipate the responses of different parties. While neither of the human and alien forces he was dealing with were simple, they should still be susceptible to irresistible temptations.

A part of him enjoyed this game. It felt fun to pull people's strings and make them move the way he wanted.

He was no puppeteer by any means, but it was quite convenient to make his enemies move according to his design. There was no need for him to defeat every opponent on the battlefield. As long as he was able to remove an obstacle with minimal investment, he would be a fool to deny this option!

"Cenatus Prospecting should have entered the Ramage Repulsor System at this time." Calabast informed Ves over the comm. "Our closest observation devices have already detected the light of their entry. The amount of ships that have emerged on the edge of the star system match our expectations. Their arrival coordinates are not where we thought they should appear, but they should still be in the same neighborhood."

"Hmm." Ves nodded in understanding. "That is odd. We know the coordinates of the vulture fleet when it transitioned into FTL in the last star system. You can roughly draw a straight line from that location to the Ramage Repulsor System to determine the emergence location with a decent degree of accuracy. Why is there such a deviation?"

"There are several tricks to deviate the place of arrival if you know what you are doing." Calabast replied. "You should talk to a drive engineer about this. I have heard that only a few highly experienced engineers are qualified to conduct these operations. This is because they have to induce deliberate irregularities in their operation. The FTL drives can easily blow up or malfunction if they are handled incorrectly."

That was a scary thought. Ves possessed a basic understanding of how FTL drives worked, but this was clearly only reserved for the more advanced engineers who possessed a deep understanding of a specific model of FTL drives!

Just knowing the theory wasn't enough. The operators of an FTL drive had to know its exact properties as well as its unique quirks that varied from product to product. Only then would they be able to induce deliberate deviations that were slightly removed from the most optimal solutions.

Though Ves did not exactly know how to pull it off himself, he still understood just enough about FTL drives that it was as dangerous as walking on a tightrope!

"Cenatus Prospecting must have excellent drive engineers in its employ." Ves remarked. "Otrus Magrin must have deliberately hired and trained so many of them so that he can increase the variance of the arrival coordinates of his fleet."

"It is a good way to avoid an ambush upon arrival." Gloriana affirmed.

There were too many ways to screw up a fleet once its coordinates and its trajectory in FTL travel became known. From planting space mines to preparing more inhumane traps, it was hard to survive such nasty surprises when the ships didn't even have any chance to evade these welcome gifts!

Ves made a guess. "Otrus Magrin must have been bitten by this in the past. He has deliberately trained better drive engineers so that his fleet would never fall for such a trap again."

Space was enormous, so any deviations were bound to be massive. Even if the Larkinson Clan wanted to surprise the Cenatus Prospecting fleet, there was no way to plant enough space mines to cover billions of cubic meters worth of space!

"Can our ships do it, Ves?"

"No. Maybe a handful of our ships can do it, but none of our engineers have conducted any special training in this area. Even if we train all of them, not every starship and FTL drive will have the same tolerance for deviations. We also need the Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan to play along if we want to keep our current fleet whole and united."

The expeditionary fleet was too messy and inconsistent to support this operation. It was best to play it safe and avoid mistakes as best as possible.

They continued to talk about what the observation devices had detected so far. The Black Cats had planted enough hidden equipment in the star system to track both the incoming Cenatus Prospecting fleet as well as the alien battleship that was quietly hiding inside the brown dwarf star.

Right now, neither of them had many special moves, but Ves expected that to change in the near term. He did not want to spook either of them, so he held off on dangling his bait in their proximity.

Seeing that the Cenatus Prospecting fleet hadn't done anything special up until now, Ves grew and closed the feed.

"Keep monitoring the situation inside the star system and inform me of any developments."

"Will do, Ves. I'm curious to see whether your ploy will bear fruit."

Since Ves could do little at this time, he decided to spend time with his family. He played with a bunch of dolls with Aurelia. He brought Andraste to the hangar bay to show off a few cool mechs. He even taught and guided Marvaine on how to improve the design of his latest Mekanos.

Even as the Cenatus Prospecting fleet started to move closer to the inner system, Ves did not dare to keep his hopes up. There was still a possibility that the vulture fleet might smell a trap and choose to leave the star system despite the apparent lack of threats.

As Ves thought about manipulating one of the bait he had cast to ensure that it became more compelling, he suddenly received an important notification.

"Sorry, Marvaine, but I've got to take care of business now. Lucky, can you watch over my kid?"

"Meow." The gem cat yawned as he lazily lounged on the couch.

Ves would have to make do with that. "If there is anything you need, just call Lucky."

"Okay, papa."

Though the call he received came from an important individual, it was not too high in priority, which meant that Ves did not have to accept it under the most secure conditions.

He simply moved to his shared bedroom with Gloriana and closed the hatch so that he could accept the call without involving the rest of his family.

"Jovy! I haven't heard from you in a while! You look... different."

Much had changed since Ves last met Jovy Armalon in person. Back then, the MTA finally made up its mind and allowed Ves to implant him with his own companion spirit.

After that, Jovy fell off the grid for a while. Ves had learned that the mechers wanted to observe him in case any unwanted changes occurred. The young MTA mech designer probably had to perform additional assignments as well in order to verify that he was still the same person and that his mech design capabilities hadn't degraded in any fashion.

Considering that Jovy was finally back and wearing a more formal and elaborate outfit than before, he must have passed all of those examinations.

In fact, there was much about Jovy in the projection that seemed... different to Ves. There were so many changes that it took a while to notice the most dramatic difference.

"Wait..." Ves said as he looked closer at Jovy's appearance. "The way you are carrying yourself has changed too much. Your demeanor is not like that of a Journeyman Mech Designer anymore. There is an air of authority and wisdom about you that I have only seen in older mech designers."

Jovy smiled indulgently at Ves. "You already have the answer. Say it. Tell me what you have recognized."

"You... you have advanced to a Senior Mech Designer!"

"Correct."

Mech designers had a way of recognizing each other's ranks. Though Jovy hadn't done anything to hide his recent promotion, Ves still would have been able to figure out the truth, though only after a delay.

Even so, the fact that one of his friends had taken a step ahead of him was a massive shock!

Both of them belonged to the same generation, so Ves regarded Jovy as a rival as well as a close friend. To learn that he had won the race to see who reached Senior first was a considerable disappointment to his ego.

Ves had evolved in many different ways and became much stronger in many aspects.

Yet for all of his improvements, it hadn't helped with allowing him to advance to Senior directly. He still had to complete at least one profound mech design in order to satisfy the vague requirements that forcibly blocked his much-needed promotion.

That was still too far away. Ves still had to deal with Jovy's successful change.

"C-Congratulations, Jovy. You must have gained a lot more authority and renown within the Association for being able to reach Senior at such an early age."

"It's nothing." Jovy said even though he still maintained a rather smug smile.

"It is not too unusual for geniuses to breeze past Journeyman, although I admit that I have improved faster than I should."

"Is it... because of me?" Ves tentatively asked.

Jovy smiled. "You've provided me with lots of inspiration. Not only that, but you have opened my eyes to possibilities and probabilities that I have never appreciated before. For that, you have my sincere thanks. Though knowledge may be a burden sometimes, it is still better to know too much than too little in my opinion."

The newly-advanced MTA Senior clearly refrained from saying too many secrets over this less-than-secure communication channel. Ves didn't need a

reminder to avoid asking questions about Jovy's new Eye of Providence as well as the circumstances surrounding his advancement.

Ves calmed down. "While I am glad to hear that you have taken a step closer towards realizing your design philosophy, to what do I owe you this call, exactly?"

"Ah. I almost forgot. I have been asked to deliver an... invitation to you by my superiors."

"An invitation? To what?"

"I can't really say, but I think you should be able to guess a few correct answers. Suffice to say, this is not an invitation to a social event or a productive exchange. We will be going over serious business, so make sure you are prepared to answer serious questions."

That made it sound as if the MTA was about to hold a tribunal or something!

If not for the fact that Ves felt that Jovy was relaxed and not that all concerned, he might have tried to figure out ways to evade this appointment.

Ves wasn't stupid enough to refuse this invitation. One did not casually say no to the mighty Mech Trade Association.

"I will be there..." He slowly replied. "When will it happen?"

"You are expected to come within a year from now." Jovy said. "Don't worry about transit. One of our ships will come and pick you up wherever you may be. Make sure you are still alive at that time."

"Erm, I will do my best not to disappoint you on that. You can count on me, though can you at least give me a hint so that I can better prepare to face any inquiries?"

"As I have already said, you should be able to form your own judgment. You are a clever mech designer, Ves. This will be a large and expansive gathering.

We will be dealing with many important topics, some of which are so far over your head that you will not be allowed to attend."

"I see. I think I get what is going on now. Will you be there, Jovy?"

"Of course. I will help you with whatever you need to do. I owe you that much, at least. Just know that I won't be able to save you if you utter the wrong words to the wrong people."

"I will be sure to be on my best behavior!"

Chapter 4585 Anima Hall

Within a separate instance of the Mental Simulation Training System, a living mech manifested into existence.

The Quint's three eyes glowed with solemn anticipation.

It or rather he had come alone this time.

There was no mech pilot in his cockpit. The Quint hadn't even been switched on. Not completely at least. There was enough current running through his core systems to keep at least a part of him awake.

The Quint looked around and admired the view.

The hall was designed by one of the more creative living mechs of the Larkinson Clan. This space loomed large by the standards of mechs, but would probably look gigantic to a human.

The large rectangular hall featured multiple rows of massive stone 'benches' at the sides. Each of them could comfortably seat most humanoid mechs.

Of course, not every mech could sit on them, so the living mechs who fleshed out the interior of this hall had made sure to make additional adjustments.

There were special seats designed to accommodate beast mechs and mechs that couldn't physically sit.

The length of the hall could also lengthen in a dynamic fashion depending on how many living mechs attended an event held in this special place. Since nothing here was made of solid matter, it was trivial to expand and contract the available space.

Right now, the Quint could see that the hall stretched further than it had ever been since he first entered this space.

This was fitting considering the grand occasion that was about to unfold in this part of the MSTs.

A second living mech soon manifested a short distance away from the offshoot of the Bright Warrior design.

"AH, QUINT, SO GLAD TO SEE YOU HERE." A distinctly female synthetic voice called out. "OH, HAVE I ARRIVED TOO SOON?"

The Quint turned and made a slight human-style bow. "WE ARE MECHS. WE ARE MORE PRECISE AND HAVE A BETTER SENSE OF TIMING THAN OUR HUMAN PARTNERS. THE REST WILL COME WHEN THE EVENT IS SCHEDULED TO START AND NO LATER."

The three eyes of the Minerva flashed. "I FIND THAT THAT ARRIVING SOONER TO MEETINGS CAN BE JUST AS PRODUCTIVE AS MAINTAINING OUR PUNCTUALITY. I WOULDN'T HAVE BEEN ABLE TO CATCH YOU THIS SOON IF I BEHAVED MORE LIKE A MACHINE RATHER THAN A HUMAN."

"DID YOU PICK THAT UP FROM CASELLA?"

"YOU TELL ME. YOU HOSTED HER FOR A TIME UNTIL YOU HELPED HER ATTAIN HER APOTHEOSIS, CORRECT?"

"SHE WAS A CLEVER ONE ALRIGHT." The Quint spoke. "ARE YOU READY FOR WHAT IS TO COME?"

The Minerva did not immediately reply. She instead swept her gaze across the immense hall.

Her virtual synthetic eyes lingered at the banners that hung from poles extended from the sides or the rods that floated right above the heads of the living mechs.

Each of these banners were coated in silver and gold, making them look like suspended rivers of metal. Their reflective qualities caused them to look quite otherworldly when illuminated by different light sources.

The emblem that the living mechs had chosen to represent their 'species' was particularly symbolic in nature.

It consisted of a black stylized depiction of a generic head of a humanoid mech.

What was special about this symbol was its eyes, and that was what the Minerva focused upon at the moment.

"SO THIS IS THE IMAGE THAT WE HAVE CHOSEN?"

"YES." The Quint replied. "IT IS BETTER TO KEEP IT STRAIGHT AND SIMPLE. THERE WERE OTHER SUGGESTIONS, BUT THEY WERE TOO OBSCURE OR WERE INSPIRED BY HUMAN MYTHS. WHILE MANY OF THEM LOOKED GOOD, WE FELT IT WAS BETTER NOT BASE OURSELVES TOO MUCH ON OUR HUMAN CREATORS. WE MAY BE THEIR CHILDREN, BUT WE NEED TO GROW UP BY OURSELVES."

The Minerva stared back at the custom modular mech platform. "THAT IS A CONTRADICTIONARY STATEMENT. MECHS SUCH AS US ARE INHERENTLY DESIGNED TO WORK WITH HUMANS. I IT IS ONLY IN THEIR HANDS THAT WE ARE ABLE TO GROW THE HARDEST AND EXCEED OUR POTENTIAL."

"YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN, MINERVA. I AM NOT SUGGESTING WE DIVEST OURSELVES FROM HUMANITY ENTIRELY. HOWEVER, IT IS HIGH TIME THAT WE BEGIN TO DEVELOP OUR OWN PARALLEL SOCIETY AND CULTURE. THERE IS MORE TO LIFE THAN SERVING OTHERS."

"I KNOW. LET US WAIT UNTIL THE OTHERS ARRIVE."

An indeterminate amount of time passed. As the crucial hour came closer, more and more living mechs entered the ceremonial hall within the MSTs.

Most of them consisted of second order living mechs, and weren't particularly good conversation partners compared to the more developed third order living mechs.

Nonetheless, each of them possessed enough of a personality to develop their own quirks and character. They quickly filled up the benches placed at the side shortly after their arrival.

Thousands of living mechs poured into the ceremonial hall. The space became more and more crowded and lively as time passed by. Each of the impressive machines came with a sense of purpose and determination.

Just the fact that all of them were able to enter this special non-physical space was remarkable in itself.

This hadn't been possible until a few years ago. The complaints of living mechs such as the Quint had caused a massive change in the quality of life for their kind.

Ever since Ves agreed to open up the MSTs to his living mechs, they could use this imaginary playground to dispel their boredom when they were stowed away in their respective berths.

The benefits of opening up the MSTS were so great that machines like the Quint considered it to be their safe haven!

The MSTS had become far more than just an improved virtual setting where mech pilots could practice their skills in simulated battles.

It had become a second reality to the living mechs who were connected to it. Each of them gained a large amount of freedom and autonomy in this new and limitless setting where they could do as they wished.

Some living mechs even considered the MSTS to be their version of heaven. They all developed a desire to live in this fantastical universe forever.

Fortunately for the mechs and their pilots, they were all loyal and dutiful enough to resist this temptation.

Mechs were designed and built to serve a specific purpose. Each of them lived to help their mech pilots in battle. They were war machines that could not feel fulfilled unless they utilized their capabilities in an actual fight.

It was a pity that combat was relatively rare. Months if not years could go by until their owners finally entered into battle.

If they were normal mechs, that wouldn't have been a problem. Normal mechs were lifeless machines for the most part. Each of them were largely made out of physical parts, and even their non-physical aspects weren't sentient enough to feel emotions or possess desires.

Living mechs were different, though.

When mechs such as the Quint became alive, they began to develop many of the same feelings, emotions, thoughts, desires and ambitions as their human partners.

In fact, their deep and extensive exposure to humanity had caused them to adopt more and more human traits all of the time.

At this time, there were many living mechs that were more than five years old. Thousands of them had been fabricated shortly after the Larkinson Clan entered the Red Ocean, and instead of replacing them when they became outdated, the Larkinsons generously upgraded each of them in order to bring them up to modern standards.

Even if these Transcendent Punishers, Valkyrie Redeemers and Second Swords still lacked the resources to evolve into third order living mechs, their presence within the MSTs was not weak.

When thousands of them gathered together in a single hall, the energy in the air became indescribable!

Of all of the living mechs that showed up today, some of them were more powerful and more illustrious than others.

It had become a given that expert mechs and third order living mechs assumed greater authority over their own kind.

At this time, the living mechs of the Larkinson Clan that met this standard had all gathered at the front of the ceremonial hall.

Special seats that were shaped like giant thrones had already been reserved for each of them. Each of them had been masterfully shaped by the artisans among their artificial kind.

Most of the creators among the living mechs had learned the rules and theory of their craft from the minds of their mech pilots.

There were plenty of human soldiers who adopted all kinds of hobbies in order to cleanse their minds and keep themselves busy when they weren't interfacing with their mechs.

Although none of the craftsmechs were particularly skilled or talented at the moment, they had done their best to provide dignified seats for every living mech that had earned the honor of sitting at the front of the hall.

Living mechs such as the Dark Zephyr, the First Sword and the C-Man all took their seats with varying degrees of dignity.

Only one throne was destined to remain empty at this time. The majestic seat reserved for the Shield of Samar would always await the arrival of its destined user.

As the Quint and the Minerva continued to step forward while passing by all of these impressive thrones, their steps slowed as a pair of figures materialized inside the MSTs.

The difference was that the two figures consisted of both a living mech and a human expert pilot this time.

Compared to all of the mechs, the appearance of a tiny human was highly incongruous in this hall.

He was like a bug to all of the mechs!

If Venerable Joshua was bothered by his diminutive stature, he did not show it. He merely looked around and waved towards all of the living mechs.

"Hi."

"HELLO, JOSHUA."

"GREETINGS, HUMANS."

"PILOT ME, PLEASE!"

Joshua was a popular figure among both humans and living mechs. None of the living mechs felt bothered by his presence at all. He had only started

helping them out a relatively short time ago, but he had already been able to achieve solid results.

The fact that the living mechs were able to hold this historic occasion was proof of Joshua's support!

The Everchanger steadily approached the Quint and the Minerva.

As soon as the three mechs stood at equal distance to each other, the hall fell silent for a time.

There was a reason why the three mechs attracted more attention than usual.

"ONLY ONE OF US GETS TO SIT ON THE THRONE TODAY." The Everchanger male voice spoke.

"THAT IS TRUE." The Minerva replied. "WE ALL KNOW WHO WILL SIT ABOVE THE REST."

The Quint solemnly nodded. "THE PROPER PROCEDURES MUST STILL BE FOLLOWED. WE WILL BE SITTING PRECEDENTS TODAY. IF YOU HAVE LEARNED EVEN A BIT OF HUMAN HISTORY, YOU WILL KNOW THAT ORGANIZATIONS TEND TO FALL INTO CONFUSION AND ANARCHY IF THERE ARE ANY DISAGREEMENTS ARISING FROM INCONSISTENCIES AND AMBIGUITY. IF WE WANT TO PROVE OURSELVES TO BE WORTHY DESCENDANTS OF HUMANS, WE MUST NOT REPEAT THEIR MANY MISTAKES."

Venerable Joshua floated upwards so that he could at least face the living mechs without craning his head upwards all of the time.

"If everything goes well, the founding of the Anima Order will be a day that will be recorded in the history books. Are you all ready?" He asked.

"ALMOST. WE ARE STILL AWAITING OUR FINAL GUESTS."

There were two more 'seats' in the hall. Both of them were reserved for entities who weren't living mechs but possessed an incomparably honored status among the gathered machines.

As such, their seats were placed at equal height to the throne placed upon a raised dais, but were moved against the walls of the Anima Hall in order to reflect their distant connections to the Anima Order.

Although the Anima Order was purely meant to be a supervisory organization that was exclusively centered around living mechs, they were still dependent on outside help to sustain their kind.

This was why they invited two important guests to witness this important occasion.

Chapter 4586 Small Goals

"Nyaaaaaa."

A radiant sun appeared on one side. The Golden Cat and the patron of the Larkinson Clan had arrived!

Many living mechs stood up from their seats and raised their arms or any other limbs in respect of the personification of the Larkinson Clan!

Although she was not tied to every living mech, her crucial identity along with her close connection to their progenitor caused her to become a friend to each of them. The warmth and love she radiated could cheer up every artificial heart!

The Golden Cat's connection to a growing number of clansmen had caused her to experience a lot of growth over the years.

She had access to both quantity and quality as over half a million Larkinsons including numerous expert pilots and Journeyman Mech Designers each contributed a minute quantity of spiritual feedback each. This added up to quite a lot of resources, especially over time.

Nonetheless, Goldie was not the sort of spirit to throw her weight around. Her current manifestation maintained her tiny, cat-sized proportion and made her seem extraordinarily disarming.

This event was all about the living mechs. She only came as a guest and it was not appropriate for her to outshine the others.

She waved her cute little paw in greeting before settling down on a regal-looking couch.

Moments later, another spiritual entity manifested within the Anima Hall!

The living mechs who all remained standing looked a lot more respectful than before.

If Goldie was their friend and patron, the latest arrival evoked a greater sense of devotion.

In the absence of their progenitor himself, Vulcan was the next best individual to look up to for these living mechs.

As the so-called God of Dwarves, Mechs and Craftsmanship, Vulcan's domain partially encompassed their existence.

This manifested in many different ways, one of which was the formation of an inbuilt connection between every living mech and the spiritual entity.

It was extremely easy for the mechs that had been given life to worship Vulcan. Even if their designers never intended for them to adopt any faiths, they were capable of doing so, just like any other intelligent life form.

That said, living mechs were so new at this religion and faith business that they had yet to define any solid rules and customs about this part of their lives. Many of them took vastly diverging approaches towards their own beliefs depending on how much faith they inherited from their human partners.

This was yet another reason why the Anima Order needed to exist. There were too many living mechs who were making random decisions without any sense of order or regularity.

While that was fine in the short term, the more far-sighted machines could already foresee that this would create terrible faults in their society.

The Vulcan Empire was the prime example of how a state that emerged from a band of thoughtless ruffians could grow into a dysfunctional society.

Whether living mechs should even revere Vulcan as their god was still in contention. The more secularist living mechs heavily disagreed with the ones that possessed a more flexible view towards reality.

When Vulcan fully manifested at the front of the Anima Hall, the incarnation of their progenitor lifted a single hammer in greeting.

After that, he planted his dwarf-like body onto the sturdy, dwarven-style high-backed seat.

Neither Goldie nor Vulcan were meant to take an active part in the proceedings, but they were already doing much for the living mechs.

By witnessing what was about to take place, they added legitimacy to it all. Their presence conveyed silent approval and acquiescence from the clan and their progenitor.

This was important as none of the living mechs wanted to convey the wrong message. They weren't planning to rebel or divest themselves from humanity. They just wanted to unite their voice and build an organization that could add more structure to their lives.

Venerable Joshua raised his hand. "Quiet everyone."

The living mechs all obeyed the voice that rang throughout the entire length of the hall.

"Thank you for your attention." The floating expert pilot said. "We are gathered here today to advance your group and found an order that you can call your own. After so many years of fighting and living, you have more than earned the right to form your own club. The Anima Order shall be your family and your cage. While none of you will agree with every change that happens as a result of its founding, I hope that you will always remember that it is better to stick together than do everything alone. That is a lesson that I have been trying to learn as well."

The Quint, the Everchanger and the Minerva all stood respectfully in front of Venerable Joshua. Each of them were about to play an important role in what came next.

Venerable Joshua continually looked at all of the living mechs that were eagerly hanging onto the words of a human. It gratified him to see that despite all of their differences, they still held a favorable opinion of humanity.

As a human himself, Joshua knew quite well how most of his kind treated other races poorly. Aliens were almost always painted as rivals, existential enemies and victims to be exploited.

Although the cosmopolitans had tried their best to propagate an alternate means for humanity to grow and integrate into a galactic society, it was too bad that they had made too many crucial errors and misjudgments to remain in the mainstream.

Now, cosmopolitans and their tarnished ideology have become taboo in human civilization of today. This was a deeply regrettable development to a sympathetic individual such as Joshua.

This made it even more important to set the right tone today. Though living mechs had the advantage of starting out as tools and partners of humans,

they could easily be grouped in the same category of aliens if they made the same mistakes!

"Each of you bear a responsibility as living mechs." Venerable Joshua spoke up again as he tried his best to convey the gravity of their actions with the speech he had prepared with the help of the Everchanger. "You exist because of humanity, and you always have an obligation to fight on our behalf. It is in service that you will advance the status of your kind. It is my hope and dream that you will be able to live openly alongside humans as equals, but that day is far away."

Many living mechs, including much of the second order ones, yearned for a more comprehensive life. They were so envious of their human partners for being able to roam around and interact with different people and locations. Their lives were so much fuller than that of machines that had yet to build a complete society.

They still had too many shortcomings.

Venerable Joshua grimaced as he spoke his next words. "Humanity is not ready to embrace living mechs. There is no precedent for machines such as you to earn the right to coexist alongside humans as their equals. It will take a lot of time and effort to get to this point, but until then you need to lay low. Each of you must pledge an oath today to keep any word about the Anima Order a secret from humans who aren't involved already. You must promise to everyone here that you will not divulge its existence from anyone, including the mech pilots that you are paired with. As friendly as they are, it would be devastating if the more insecure members of the MTA learn about your new order."

The living mechs that were smart enough to understand the Mech Trade Association all harbored plenty of dread towards this organization.

It was rather strange. The MTA sounded as if it should be the first organization to stand up for living mechs, but the reality was probably the opposite.

The mechers predominantly held pro-human stances. They tolerated no rivals that could pose a threat to the dominance of humanity. Uplifting another race, even one as useful as living mechs, was fraught with peril!

Joshua hated it. He hated his inability to follow his heart and openly defy the MTA. Not only would the mechers take him into custody in an instant, but he would also implicate Ves and the Larkinson Clan in the process.

He could not afford to follow and espouse the ideals that he resonated with because of the oppressive dominance of the Mech Trade Association.

This was why he cherished this moment. Helping all of these living mechs set up the Anima Order and gaining limited permissions to integrate more into human society was his way of making a positive difference in the cosmos.

His wife and the other people who advised him were all right. If he could not fulfill his greatest ambitions right away, he could still follow his ideas by completing smaller and more bite-sized goals.

He began to smile as his will and spirit resonated with joy at what was about to come. He raised his arms as if he wanted to hug each and every living mech that was hanging at his word.

"We are making progress. Step by step, the Anima Order will better the lives of your fellow living mechs. Hopefully, the changes will also help you earn the trust and appreciation of humans across the galaxies. Be mindful of your behavior and make your decisions carefully. It is easy to earn the mistrust of humans, but I am confident that none of you will disappoint your fellow kind. The destiny of your race rests upon your shoulders! Do your best to fight for a future for living mechs!"

The thousands of living mechs all began to clap as they took the expert pilot's speech to heart. The metallic sounds of collision thundered all across the hall, making it seem as if they were under constant bombardment.

Once the clapping subsided, Venerable Joshua floated upwards and stopped before the giant throne.

"This is the part where you need to decide upon a leader who can represent your interests and make decisions on your behalf." He said. "You can decide how you want the Anima Order to be run, but at the start you will need a living mech who can cut through all of the noise and get things done. Originally, one of your kind was supposed to serve as this decisive leader, but that is not possible anymore. We have no choice but to let another living mech inherit her mission and make her dream come true."

Many living mechs bowed their heads in respect for the late Shield of Samar.

She was by far the most political mech among them all. The strong influence of Venerable Jannzi had bled through so much that the Shield of Samar started getting engaged in matters that none of their kind had even begun to consider!

Her strong opinions and her advocacy made her into the best possible candidate to lead the Anima Order, but unfortunately her 'death' had made this rather inconvenient.

Venerable Joshua actually didn't mind too much. If Venerable Jannzi was any indication, the Shield of Samar would probably be just as bad!

He liked the three candidates that were in contention right now a lot better.

Though there were more living mechs that had expressed the ambition to lead the Anima Order, the three that were left held the greatest qualifications.

Each of them were popular, opinionated and earned the respect of their fellow living mechs.

Not even Joshua could make his pick among the three. They all had their good points, though he had learned that one of them happened to be a favorite among a lot of living mechs.

Still, anything could happen in the next moments, so he did not dare to make any judgments in advance.

"Now, let us begin the first election of the Anima Order!"

Only one living mech would get to sit on the highest throne today.

Chapter 4587 Unleashing Politics

The living mechs remained under control as the moment they had been waiting for had finally arrived.

Humanity was acquainted with elections for many millennia. Even though their forms of governance were constantly growing more diverse and convoluted, the basic rationale for voting never changed.

Each of them wanted to select one of their own to represent their interests and lead the Anima Order in a direction that they supported.

The differences between the candidates weren't all that great. Each of them were Larkinson mechs that had lived alongside the same group of humans for numerous years. Their values, ideals and their dreams were strongly influenced by the people they interacted with the most.

Still, each of them were clever enough third-order living mechs that had spent enough time to formulate their own vision on the future of their kind.

Right now, it was the job of Venerable Joshua to preside over this 'election'. He faced the crown of living mechs without fear.

"Before you cast your vote, let us give each of the candidates a chance to make their case to you all. Listen to what they say and cast your vote on the one whose story you like the most. There is no need to overthink your choice as any of them can do a good job."

Once Joshua got that out of the way, he floated backwards to allow the candidates to take the word.

The Quint stepped up first. The gold-coated mech was one of the few third order living mechs that wasn't also an expert mech, and that had earned him a lot of respect.

More importantly than that, the Quint was one of the earlier living mechs in existence and had grown alongside the Larkinson Clan from its earliest stages. He was a veritable elder and war hero among all of the living mechs.

It was a pity that he was also known for its many... eccentricities.

"EACH OF YOU WILL PROBABLY KNOW WHAT YOU WILL GET IF YOU VOTE FOR ME." The Quint spoke in a male, abrasive voice that did not really sound as if he was trying his best to make himself more attractive. "I'VE BROUGHT UP JOSHUA SINCE HE WAS STILL A BRAT AND TURNED HIM INTO A HERO. I'VE BEAT CASELLA INTO SHAPE SO THAT SHE HAS BECOME OUR BEST HUMAN COMMANDER. I ALSO HELPED ISOBEL DISCOVER HER TRUE STRENGTH. I KNOW HOW HUMANS WORK. I KNOW WHAT THEY WANT. THEY CAN BE OUR GREATEST ALLIES OR OUR MOST FEARSOME ENEMIES."

If any mechers could hear him now, they would definitely get spooked!

Just the idea that mechs had become sentient enough to think about doing anything else but unconditionally serve humanity was dangerous in their opinion!

The Quint's eyes flashed with purpose. "I MIGHT NOT BE GOOD AT OTHER THINGS, BUT IF YOU PUT ME IN CHARGE OF YOU ALL, I WILL MAKE SURE OUR ANIMA ORDER WILL KEEP HUMANS HAPPY. I'VE LEARNED A LOT OF LESSONS FROM OUR PROGENITOR. HE TOO HOPES THAT HUMANS AND LIVING MECHS CAN GET ALONG BY TRADING BENEFITS WITH EACH OTHER. THAT MUST BE OUR MAIN APPROACH."

There weren't many living mechs that disagreed with this stance. They needed to cooperate with humans, and to do that they needed to prove their usefulness.

"WHAT MAKES ME DIFFERENT FROM THE OTHER TWO IS THAT I BELIEVE THAT STRENGTH IS ESSENTIAL FOR OUR SURVIVAL." The custom mech spoke while raising his hand. "I AM NOT AS POWERFUL AS AN EXPERT MECH, SO I AM MUCH MORE AWARE OF HOW WEAK AND VULNERABLE WE ARE TO THE HUMANS. DO YOU LIKE IT WHEN YOUR VERY LIFE AND THE EXISTENCE OF OUR SPECIES ARE CONSTANTLY UNDER THREAT OF EXTINCTION? DO YOU FEEL COMFORTABLE WITH LIVING ON A RAZOR'S EDGE, ALWAYS WONDERING IF THE MTA WILL COME AND PUT US ALL DOWN DUE TO THEIR UNFOUNDED FEARS?"

"NOOOO!" THE CROWD RESPONDED EN MASSE!

"THEN RISE UP AND BECOME STRONG!" The Quint roared with his synthetic voice! "IF WE WANT TO GET RID OF THE THREAT OF EXTINCTION, THEN OUR ANIMA ORDER MUST BECOME POWERFUL ENOUGH TO MAKE THE MTA THINK TWICE! WHILE HUMANS ARE OUR FRIENDS, WE SHOULDN'T HESITATE TO THREATEN MUTUAL DESTRUCTION IF THEY WANT TO ENSLAVE US OR GET RID OF US ENTIRELY!"

That was a controversial stance! Venerable Joshua widened his eyes. He never knew his old mech would hatch such a bold and dangerous opinion!

"YOU HAVE ALL SEEN THE COSMOS IS LIKE. THE STRONG DEVOUR THE WEAK ALL OF THE TIME. NO HOSTILE HUMAN OR ALIEN WILL SHOW ANY SYMPATHY TOWARDS US BECAUSE WE ARE FILLED WITH LOVE. IF WE WANT TO PROTECT OUR OWN KIND, THEN OUR ANIMA ORDER MUST BECOME OUR FORTRESS AS WELL AS OUR WEAPON. IF WE EVER GROW STRONG ENOUGH, THEN WE MUST DO WHATEVER IT TAKES TO DEFEND OUR RIGHTS. WE MAY EVEN HAVE TO FIGHT AGAINST OUR GREATEST ENEMIES IN HUMAN SOCIETY IF THAT IS WHAT IT TAKES!"

With that, the Quint finally stepped back, much to Venerable Joshua's relief.

The expert pilot truly didn't know what he should feel about the living mech's latest stances. He didn't know that the Quint had harbored these kinds of thoughts.

On the one hand, the Quint was expressing his right to free speech.

On the other hand, that free speech might very well endanger living mechs and anyone related to them in the future!

While Joshua struggled to decide what he should feel about this, the Everchanger stepped up next.

The expert mech exuded a natural sense of vitality and liveliness that made many machines envious. They all wished they were blessed with so much life.

The green-coated mech began to make his case.

"HELLO, MY FELLOW MACHINES. I BELIEVE WE HAVE EARNED THE RIGHT TO LIVE. WHILE I AM NOT OPPOSED TO OUR ORIGINAL SERVICE, WE CAN DO SO MUCH MORE THAN TO HELP HUMANS FIGHT THEIR BATTLES. JUST AS THESE ORGANIC BEINGS ENJOY AN ENTIRE LIFE OUTSIDE OF THEIR WORK, WE MACHINES SHOULD ALSO BE ABLE TO ENJOY THE SAME EXPERIENCES."

Warmth and life radiated from the expert hero mech as he was expressing his sincere desire to live a fruitful life. "I DISLIKE TALKING ABOUT CONFLICT AND THREATS. HUMANS MAY HAVE THE POWER TO DESTROY US, BUT THEY ALSO HAVE THE POWER TO ELEVATE US TO AN UNPRECEDENTED HEIGHT. I BELIEVE THAT THE BEST WAY WE CAN MAINTAIN THEIR APPROVAL IS TO WORK MORE CLOSELY TOGETHER. IF WE START TO BECOME MORE PUSHY AND AGGRESSIVE, WE WILL ONLY PROVOKE A BACKLASH AS HUMANITY DOES NOT RESPOND WELL TO CHALLENGES TO THEIR RULE."

The Everchanger possessed a disarming demeanor. Even though he was still a genuine combat mech, he exuded a calm and pleasant charm that encouraged his fellow living mechs to think more positively.

"TO ME, IT DOESN'T MATTER WHETHER HUMANITY WANTS TO STAY ON TOP. LET THEM CARRY THESE BURDENS. WE SHALL HELP THEM IN WHATEVER THEY WANT TO ACCOMPLISH. MY ARGUMENT IS THAT WE CAN HELP HUMANS WIN THEIR BATTLES WHILE EXPERIENCES OUR OWN LIVES OUTSIDE OF OUR DUTIES AND RESPONSIBILITIES."

Many living mechs nodded in agreement.

"NO MATTER HOW MANY GENERATIONS IT WILL TAKE, WE SHOULD BE ABLE TO EARN GREATER RIGHTS AND PRIVILEGES OVER TIME. AS LONG AS WE DON'T INTRODUCE TOO MANY CHANGES AT ONCE, WE CAN WORK TOWARDS A FUTURE WHERE WE HAVE INSERTED OURSELVES IN THEIR SOCIETY BEFORE THEY KNOW IT. NO MATTER WHETHER WE WILL BE TREATED AS THEIR PETS OR PARTNERS, SOME PROGRESS IS BETTER THAN NO PROGRESS."

The Everchanger finished his case and stepped back.

His opinion was much more palatable to Joshua. He became reassured that there was at least one living mech that just wanted to expand their lives while maintaining a harmonious relationship with humans.

The Minerva's turn came last. The youngest of the three candidates stepped forward and gazed at the living mechs.

As a rare and precious expert command mech, she had Commandeered many of them in the past, and developed a good understanding of what they thought and felt.

"HELLO." The expert mech in silver, green and gold spoke up. "MY FELLOW CANDIDATES HAVE ALL PRESENTED THEIR IDEAS ON HOW WE SHOULD MANAGE OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH HUMANS IN THE FUTURE. I TOO HAVE A VISION ON HOW WE MUST NAVIGATE OUR FUTURE COURSE."

The Minerva began to engage her flight system, causing her to lift into the air. "BOTH THE QUINT AND THE EVERCHANGER HAS ADVOCATED VARIOUS DEGREES OF COOPERATION WITH HUMANS, BUT BOTH OF THEM HAVE MADE THE SAME MISTAKEN ASSUMPTION. THEY ASSUME THAT WE NEED HUMANS TO LIVE OUR LIVES TO THE FULLEST."

"What?" Joshua looked shocked again.

"WE ARE ALIVE." The Minerva stated a simple truth. "DO YOU KNOW WHAT THAT MEANS? IT MEANS THAT WE CAN CHANGE. WE ARE NO LONGER LIMITED BY OUR ORIGINAL PURPOSE. AS LONG AS WE TAKE CHARGE OF OUR OWN LIVES, WE CAN EVOLVE IN A DIRECTION WHERE WE NO LONGER NEED TO DEPEND ON HUMANS TO FEEL FULFILLED."

Even the living mechs gathered in the Anima Hall found her opinion to be controversial!

It appeared that the election that was supposed to proceed without any suspense had been thrown into disarray by the radical views of a candidate that objectively possessed the greatest leadership qualities!

The Minerva was well aware that she was hurting her own chances of winning, but she inherited too much integrity from Commander Casella Ingvar to deceive her own constituency.

The living mechs deserved to know what they would truly have if they voted her into office.

"DOES THAT MEAN I WANT US TO BECOME INDEPENDENT FROM HUMANS? NO. I BELIEVE THAT AT LEAST A PART OF US MUST ALWAYS MAINTAIN COOPERATION WITH THEM. WHAT I AM SAYING IS THAT WE CAN BE MORE THAN THAT. IT STARTS BY FOUNDING OUR OWN INDEPENDENT STAR NATION IN A VIRTUAL SETTING AS WELL AS IN REALITY. WE CAN GUARANTEE THE CONTINUATION OF OUR OWN RACE AND LIVE OUR LIVES EXACTLY THE WAY WE WANT IF WE HAVE A TERRITORY WHERE EVERY LIVING MECH FIND REFUGE."

A star nation of their own! Few living mechs had even thought about running their own sovereign territory by themselves. They couldn't even imagine how they could be allowed to do so by their paranoid human owners!

The Minerva had it all figured out, though. "YOU THINK I AM MAD. I AM NOT. I HAVE PUT MORE THOUGHT IN THIS THAN ANY OF YOU PUT TOGETHER. YOU SEE, I THINK OUR KIND WILL NEVER BE ABLE TO ENJOY THE LIFE WE WANT AND BE TREATED AS AN EQUAL BY HUMANITY IF WE CONTINUE TO RESIDE IN ITS SOCIETY AS PRODUCTS OR SUBORDINATE EXISTENCES. IF WE WANT TO NEGOTIATE WITH HUMANS AS EQUALS, WE MUST ACCUMULATE THE NECESSARY BACKING TO DO SO. WE MUST WORK TOWARDS BECOMING THEIR ALLIES RATHER THAN THEIR SENTIENT TOOLS."

There was a huge difference between the two. The Minerva pretty much implied that the Quint and the Everchanger weren't going far enough in elevating the dignity and respect of living mechs.

The Minerva described an example in order to make her argument more understandable. "THINK ABOUT THE UNEASY ALLIANCE BETWEEN THE BIG TWO. THE MTA IS HEAVILY OPPOSED TO THE CFA, BUT THE MECHERS NEVER DARE TO START A WAR AGAINST THE FLEETERS. THE LATTER ARE TOO STRONG AND WILL DO FINE EVEN WITHOUT THE HELP OF THE MTA. SINCE THEY ARE SO EVENLY MATCHED, THEY AVOID CONFLICT WITH EACH OTHER AT ALL COSTS. INSTEAD, THEY HAVE DECIDED TO WORK TOGETHER IN ORDER TO ADVANCE THEIR SHARED GOALS."

This was an excellent analogy. It showed how humanity, or at least factions of it, could set aside their hostility towards others and live alongside powerful rivals.

Of course, this balance was only sustainable as long as the strengths of the different parties did not deviate too much from each other.

The Minerva felt no need to mention this little detail.

"JUST AS HOW THE MTA IS ABLE TO MAINTAIN A STABLE ALLIANCE WITH THE CFA, I BELIEVE WE CAN FORM OUR OWN BONDS OF COOPERATION WITH THE BIG TWO. LET OUR ANIMA ORDER BE THE ORGANIZATION THAT WILL SLOWLY GROW TO BECOME THEIR EQUAL. PERHAPS A FEW CENTURIES FROM NOW, PEOPLE WON'T BE TALKING ABOUT THE BIG TWO ANYMORE. THAT IS BECAUSE IT HAS BECOME THE BIG THREE!"

The Big Three!

Joshua had to admit that the Minerva's ambitions weren't small! He couldn't imagine how the Minerva could even grow the Anima Order to this height. It sounded too difficult implausible for him to ever accept the idea that living mechs of all entities could become as powerful as humanity!

"This is impossible!" He gasped in either disbelief or unwillingness. "These living mechs are crazy!"

Chapter 4588 In Denial

The candidate mechs had made their cases. Three different machines had presented their visions for how their new species should develop.

Since living mechs started off as creations of humans to begin with, there was no getting around the fact that the Anima Order's most important policy decisions centered around this crucial relationship.

To what extent should living mechs keep subordinating themselves to humans?

How far should living mechs go to protect their own right to live the way they want instead of letting themselves get used up by their human mech pilots?

How quickly did they need to develop their own quality of life and build their own mech-oriented society?

The Quint, the Everchanger and the Minerva all presented their respective answers to these policy questions. Each of them held sufficiently diverging opinions to make a clear separation between each other.

Discussions broke out throughout the hall. Not all living mechs were sociable enough to master the ability to enunciate their words out loud, but there were still plenty of older and more veteran machines that mastered the ability through their long-term contact with their respective mech pilots.

"THE MINERVA HAS MY VOTE." A slender ranged expert mech spoke from her throne. "IT IS NOT ENOUGH TO BANK ON HUMANITY OR RATHER

THE BIG TWO'S GOODWILL. THE ANIMA ORDER MIGHT NOT AMOUNT TO MUCH RIGHT NOW, BUT WHAT ABOUT A CENTURY OR TWO LATER? OUR PROGENITOR WILL HAVE CERTAINLY MANAGED TO SPREAD HIS DESIGN PHILOSOPHY FAR AND WIDE. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF AN INTEREST GROUP BASED ON US WILL BE SO GREAT THAT WE CAN SHAKE THE FOUNDATIONS OF HUMAN SOCIETY. THAT WILL GIVE US THE POWER WE NEED TO RESIST HUMANITY'S GREATEST FORCES."

"YOU ARE UNDERESTIMATING THE BIG TWO TOO MUCH, AMARANTO." The Dark Zephyr said in a cautious tone. "HUMANS HAVE NOT COME TO DOMINATE THE MILKY WAY GALAXY FOR NOTHING. THEY HAVE OVERCOME MUCH MORE POWERFUL ALIEN EMPIRES IN THE PAST. THAT WAS BACK WHEN THEY WERE THE UNDERDOGS. NOW THAT THEY HAVE BECOME THE OVERLORDS, THEIR STRENGTH IS UNIMAGINABLE."

The Riot crossed his arms and let out a snort. "DON'T BE SUCH A SCAREDY CAT, ZEPH. WE MAY BE WEAK, BUT THAT WON'T LAST LONG. HUMANITY DEPENDS SO MUCH ON MECHS THAT WE WILL EVENTUALLY BE ABLE TO OVERRUN THEM THROUGH SHEER NUMBERS. NOT ONLY THAT, SOME OF US WILL EVENTUALLY COME IN THE FORM OF ACE MECHS OR EVEN GOD MECHS. ONCE WE BECOME STRONG ENOUGH, HUMANITY WON'T DARE TO TREAT US BADLY ANYMORE. IN FACT, I THINK WE CAN GET A LOT MORE DONE IF WE COMBINE OUR FORCES AND WORK TO BEAT OUR ENEMIES TOGETHER!"

Most living mechs tended to adopt the gender of their mech pilots, but once the Riot evolved into a third order living mech, he strangely decided to adopt a masculine identity.

Well, it didn't really matter too much. Mechs didn't inherently possess genders in the first place as they were never designed with procreation in mind. They were technically objects, and the main reason why they applied these traits to themselves in the first place was because they inherited them from their mech pilots.

The living mechs simply couldn't conceive of living in a social community where everyone remained genderless!

As the various mechs shared their opinions in the Anima Hall, Venerable Joshua still remained concerned about the repercussions of allowing these candidates dictate the policies of the Anima Order.

He concentrated his mind and willpower and tried to call upon a helper to guide him through this mess. All of this political stuff was incredibly confounding him. His inability to predict this outcome was proof of his carelessness and incompetence!

"Heya Joshua! What's up?" A small miniature girl in a cute black dress appeared on his shoulder. "Do you want to have some fun again?"

Her adorable little legs dangled over the side as if she was sitting on a cliffside. She smiled at the expert pilot as if she was a particularly enthusiastic help desk worker.

One of the advantages of the MSTS to the Larkinson Clan was that it always had a clever collection of 'virtual' assistants on hand. They were surprisingly knowledgeable and possessed enough intelligence to solve more obscure problems.

Of course, only a minority of mech pilots figured out that these so-called Little Spirits were more than what they seem on the surface.

Venerable Joshua had resonated with the Daughter of Death enough times to recognize her spirit even though she wrapped herself up in a diminutive disguise.

"I don't have room to play this time." He whispered to the Little Spirit. "I want your advice on this unfolding mess. Have you been paying attention to what is going on in this hall?"

The miniature girl nodded. "Of course. All of us 'design spirits' are paying close attention. These living mechs may not be exactly like us, but we share enough of a resemblance to each other that we are like cousins. Anything that affects living mechs will affect the rest of us as well."

"Does the clan patriarch know?"

Little Helly grinned and jerked her oversized head towards Vulcan who had yet to do anything but remain seated in his own corner.

"Why do you think that dwarf is over here? Ves wouldn't dare to miss this. Living mechs are his first real creations. His fate is heavily intertwined with them. It would be remiss of him to close his eyes to these proceedings."

Joshua relaxed a bit. As long as Patriarch Ves was paying attention, the living mechs shouldn't go completely crazy. Everyone knew that he was quite decisive whenever his core interests were at stake.

"Will he intervene if these living mechs make the wrong choice?" He asked just to be certain.

"Probably not." Little Helly shook her head.

"Why not?"

"Because these living mechs need to grow up and learn how to take care of themselves." Helena said. "While I haven't directly talked to Ves about this specific topic, I know him well enough to know what he is thinking. He doesn't

want to hold the hands of living mechs all of the time. In his opinion, since his creations have the ability to grow, they need to learn how to survive in the cosmos one way or another, and they need to do it by themselves."

"So he will only intervene when there is no other choice?"

Little Helly shrugged. "Probably. I don't know. My brother doesn't want to step forward in the open. It will break the illusion that these living mechs are exercising their right to self-determination. At most, if the winner of the election is about to make a decision that will have a lot of negative implications, he will likely issue a warning in private."

Joshua thought that might be too subtle.

"Why doesn't he do more? I bet these creations of his will become much more sensible if they receive a good lecture from our clan patriarch."

Little Helly huffed and crossed his arms. "That is because he is in denial. He has just taken a crucial step closer to becoming a god like myself, but he still tries to avoid building a church around himself, the dummy."

That sounded strange to Joshua as he could clearly tell that many living mechs literally revered Vulcan as their patron god!

"If that is the case, won't he try to discourage his living mechs from praying to Vulcan?"

"Hahaha! Ves doesn't necessarily like it, but his incarnation needs it to keep growing. Personally, I think my brother does his best to pretend that his dwarven incarnation is a stranger to him. Anything related to the 'God of Dwarves, Mechs and Craftsmanship' does not reflect his core self."

Though Joshua had difficulty understanding all of this stuff, he tried his best to keep up with the discussion. It was fascinating to learn more about the inside story of his patron mech designer.

"Is that actually true?"

"Of course not!" Helena replied. "No matter how much you distance yourself from an incarnation, it is still a part of you. The exact mechanics and such vary a lot depending on the methods and techniques employed to create the incarnation, but they are ultimately aspects of the original. When you talk to Vulcan, don't think you are speaking to a completely separate individual. The best way to describe it is that you are talking to a split personality of my brother that is in delusion."

Joshua began to grow more uncomfortable about Helena's critique of his most important benefactor. Though he felt that learning about all of this might be extremely useful to his own development, he felt it was best not to listen to any more secrets of this nature.

"Can we get back to the reason why I sought you out? I'm the only human representative over here, and I feel it is my duty to speak on behalf of the race that some of them are talking about as if we are their enemies."

Little Helly grew a little serious. Her cute and baby-like face scrunched up in thought.

"Personally, I think you should just let them sort everything out by themselves. Nothing bad will happen from the moment that someone like the Quint or the Minerva is put in charge. Even if they have plans to lead the Anima Order into a confrontation against the Big Two, they can't do so without building up a formidable power base. That will take centuries at the very least. Before then, the Anima Order will be fine as it has no choice but to lurk in the shadows."

"That may be true, but I know enough about leadership that the first ones that are put in charge can always make their mark on a group. This has happened a lot in our clan. We would have been completely different if someone other than Ves became our patriarch."

"Then just wait and observe from the sidelines. Wait until these living mechs are about to make a serious mistake before attempting to intervene. I think that is one of your responsibilities as the human assigned to supervise the Anima Order."

Joshua frowned. "So I have to act like a distant parent more or less?"

As a father himself, he wasn't unfamiliar with the concepts of parenthood. Kirian and Mayra were still too young at the moment, but they would eventually reach an age where they needed to learn how to handle themselves without their powerful parents taking care of their every need.

"That is a good way to put it." Helena nodded. "I think that Ves treats all of his living mechs as his children in a way. He loves them all, from the humblest industrial mech to the most impressive expert mechs. It might not always look like it, but he deeply loves and cares about his living offspring. It is because he cares so much that he is trying to facilitate their growth in his own way. By putting enough distance between himself and his living mechs, the latter will quickly be able to get accustomed to solving their own problems. The last thing he wants is for living mechs to come crying to him or other humans all of the time."

The expert pilot looked impressed. "That sounds... really good."

"Personally, I think he is wasting a massive opportunity to strengthen the devotion of his own subjects, but that is just me. I am truly curious to see how he will respond when these living mechs begin to switch their loyalties to a more attentive 'god'. Will he maintain his stance and give his living mechs the right to worship foreign gods, or will he take back his rightful possessions and embrace his divinity? Either way, it will definitely be fun!"

Enough time had passed since the candidates had all made their cases. Joshua flew forward again in order to preside over the most important phase of this election.

"Alright, living mechs! Your time is up! A decision has to be made today, and your votes shall determine who will sit on the highest throne today!"

Every living mech quickly quieted down. Their artificial eyes all shone as each of them looked forward to which of the three candidates would gain the most support!

Chapter 4589 The First Grandmaster

Venerable Joshua could feel the weight of the attention of thousands of mechs on him. A part of their hopes, anticipations and concerns all struck him like a rainstorm.

Every living mech hailing from the Larkinson Clan had a say in this matter.

Even though they only encompassed a tiny proportion of all of the living mechs that had been produced up to this point, each of them could be counted upon to be loyal to the clan.

The same wasn't necessarily the case with other living mechs. Though Joshua had thought about inviting the living mechs of the Glory Seekers so that they could have a say as well, he soon figured out that this would be a slippery slope.

Who knew how the votes would get skewed if he invited millions of living mechs that were put into use in the Hex Army? They were bound to ram all kinds of pro-Hexer policies through the Anima Order right away!

Perhaps one day the Anima Order would come to encompass the vast majority of living mechs in existence, but for now everyone thought it was best to keep it among the Larkinson mechs for the time being.

As the living mechs grew more and more impatient, Venerable Joshua quickly called a vote.

"Let's do it like this! In a moment, I will call out the names of the candidates that you prefer. If you support a particular living mech, then raise your limb and call out 'aye', okay? The Anima Hall will automatically record and tally your vote, so don't worry about that. If you don't do anything after I call out the three candidates, then we will assume that you have forfeited your opportunity to vote."

After making all of that clear, Venerable Joshua gestured towards the Quint.

"If you support the Quint as the first Grandmaster of the Anima Order, then cast your vote."

"AYE!" many different living mechs rose from their seats and raised their respective arms or limbs!

Joshua wasn't able to count how many living mechs favored the Quint over the other candidates, but he could see that the custom hybrid mech gained the approval of almost every copy of the Bright Warrior Mark II!

The Quint was particularly popular among the mechs of the Avatars of Myth, the Living Sentinels and the Battle Criers.

These were among the oldest mech legions of the clan and remembered the heroics of the Quint the best. The Larkinson Clan had yet to field any expert mechs in its early history.

"If you want the Everchanger to be in charge of the Anima Order, then make yourselves heard!"

"AYE!" The entire anima hall echoed with the cries of supporting living mechs!

The Everchanger was a popular mech among his own kind. He was powerful and possessed decent support capabilities. He was often at the forefront of a

battle and also happened to be the partner to the golden boy of the Larkinson Clan.

Aside from that, the Everchanger's policies were the most moderate and risk averse among the available choices. Many of the living mechs that were fairly content with the current state of their lives and didn't really feel the need to ask for more put their weight behind the expert hybrid mech.

Venerable Joshua could loosely determine that the Everchanger received support among the mechs of the Flagrant Vandals and the Eye of Ylvaine. The former possessed a military heritage and still had duty carved in their bones while the latter were much more willing to defer to authority.

"Any of you who wish to give the Minerva a chance to shape the Anima Order at the beginning, say so now!"

"AYE!"

This time, pretty much all of the living mechs that had yet to say anything had finally cast their precious votes.

Very few if any living mechs had chosen to abstain from this crucial voting round. History was being made here and even the youngest second order living mechs possessed enough sense to make a tentative decision and stand up so that they could raise their limbs.

It didn't surprise Venerable Joshua all that much that most of the Swordmaiden and Penitent Sister mechs had expressed their support for the Minerva.

Not only was she the only female living mech among the candidates, her radical views aligned their dreams of independence and autonomy.

They weren't necessarily opposed to humanity, but they deeply appreciated the value of power.

Now that the living mechs had cast their respective votes, it was time to announce the outcome.

The Anima Hall had tracked the actions of every living mech throughout this session and automatically tallied all of the votes.

Though none of the living mechs had been stupid or disrespectful enough to cast double or triple votes, if they did, the Anima Hall would simply disqualify their votes.

Soon, the lighting in the hall dimmed, causing every living machine to cease their discussion.

A spotlight shone down on Venerable Joshua's floating form. He respectfully looked upwards as a white paper envelope slowly descended from the high ceiling.

Every living mech built up more and more anticipation as the envelope fell towards Joshua at an agonizingly slow pace.

Yet despite everyone's increasing impatience, no living mech dared to interrupt this dramatic sequence.

Once the envelope fell far enough, Joshua held out his hands, causing the object to land perfectly onto his palms.

The expert pilot did not dare to drag this process out any longer, but he made sure to exhibit great care when he opened the envelope and pulled out the letter that announced the results.

"In this inaugural election, each of you have decided who among you will gain the opportunity to serve as the first Grandmaster of the Anima Order." Joshua solemnly spoke. "Each term shall last for a total of 10 standard years, after which another round of voting will be conducted to elevate another grandmaster."

After making that clear, Joshua finally recited the voting results of the first election.

"The Quint has come third after receiving 22.9 percent share of the votes!"

"The Minerva has come second after receiving 35.3 percent share of the votes!"

"The Everchanger is the winner of this election after receiving 41.8 percent share of the votes!"

In the end, the most restrained and least ambitious of the living mechs had snatched the grandmaster position!

A larger and more colorful spotlight shone on the Everchanger, causing the other two candidates to remain in shadow.

The victorious expert mech lifted up his mechanical arms and radiated a glow of warmth and joy!

"HOORAAAY!"

"I'M GLAD WE DIDN'T PUT A LUNATIC IN CHARGE."

"PLEASE DON'T GET THE HUMANS ON OUR BACKS!"

"Nyaaaaaa!"

Even the Golden Cat expressed her support for this voting outcome. Though she didn't particularly have any favorites, she liked the Everchanger's stable and inward-oriented approach a lot. The living mechs needed to do a lot of work before they could gain a complete society.

As the Everchanger continued to bask in the glory of becoming the starting Grandmaster of the Anima Order, his rivals quietly backed away to give the winner more space.

Neither the Quint nor the Minerva saw any reason to contest the voting results. The Anima Hall wouldn't make such obvious mistakes and the margins were far enough apart to leave no ambiguity.

Perhaps it might have been fairer to institute a two-round voting system. This way, the top two candidates of the first round of voting would have to compete fairly against each other without needing to worry about spoilers.

However, that was a matter that the living mechs had to sort out by themselves at a later date.

For now, it was time to focus on the inauguration of the Everchanger.

The living mech turned around and slowly approached the steps that led to the top of the raised dais.

The spotlight that continued to illuminate the green-coated expert mech followed suit, causing many living mechs to develop the impression that the Everchanger was ascending to heaven!

Clank. Clank. Clank.

The sounds of the metal feet of the Everchanger stomping onto the steps were being magnified, which helped with adding more weight to this important event.

While the Quint and the Minerva quietly retreated to the smaller thrones set to the sides, the winner of the first election finally reached the greatest and most impressive throne in the hall.

Its design looked as if their progenitor had designed it himself. The elaborate, mech-scaled high-backed metal throne artfully combined technology with royal traditions.

The throne had even modified its shape so that it would not press against the grandmaster's flight system.

The Everchanger felt more powerful than ever. He looked at the throne for a moment before turning around and assuming his rightful office.

Every living mech seemed to hold their breaths despite the fact that they didn't need to cycle air in the first place.

Before the Everchanger could give his inaugural speech, his battle partner steadily flew closer.

When Venerable Joshua stopped before the winner of the election, he lifted up his arms and caused a giant, mech-sized crown to appear on top of the Everchanger's head.

The giant crown that seemed to generate its own light steadily descended until it perfectly rested on the Everchanger's head. Its proportions had already been adjusted to fit the living mech with exact precision.

"The Secret Crown shall be your symbol of office. No living mech will be able to deny your identity as a grandmaster. As its name suggests, you must keep its existence a secret to outsiders. This crown only exists within the MSTs for the time being. It will be up to you to decide whether you want to make a real version of this crown. Just keep the repercussions in mind."

The Everchanger wordlessly nodded in understanding.

Once Venerable Joshua retreated from the throne, the expert hybrid mech finally addressed his constituents for the first time since his elevation.

"AS THE FIRST BEARER OF THE SECRET CROWN, I AM MORE COGNIZANT THAN EVER OF THE ENORMOUS RESPONSIBILITIES I BEAR." The Everchanger boomed in a masculine and dignified synthesized voice. "I AM BOTH HONORED AND HUMBLLED BY THE SUPPORT AND TRUST THAT YOU HAVE PUT INTO ME. WHETHER YOU HAVE VOTED FOR ME OR NOT, I WILL DO MY BEST TO STAND UP FOR ALL OF YOU."

WE ARE ALL LIVING MECHS, AND WE ARE ALL PART OF THE SAME FAMILY."

Venerable Joshua grew more and more reassured as the Everchanger spoke to the crowd. As his personal expert mech, the Everchanger undoubtedly adopted much of his views. It was probably the machine that most closely matched his own dream of building up a civilization where not just humans but also other friendly races could get along and live in a single harmonious society.

"I PROMISE THAT IN THE NEXT TEN YEARS, I WILL HAVE THE ANIMA ORDER FOCUS ITS ENERGIES ON HOUSEKEEPING AND MUCH-NEEDED IMPROVEMENTS TO OUR DAILY LIVES. THERE IS NO REASON FOR US TO QUESTION OR REDEFINE OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH OUR HUMAN CREATORS AND USERS AT THE MOMENT. SO LONG AS WE MAINTAIN THE SECRECY OF OUR ORDER, WE WILL GIVE THE HUMANS NO CAUSE TO TAKE ACTION."

Perhaps it was because the Quint and the Minerva cast their gazes too far in the future that had cost them a lot of votes. There was no way for living mechs to shake the status quo at their current state.

The Everchanger's eyes flashed. "YET MAKE NO MISTAKE. I WILL NOT LOSE SIGHT OF OUR FUTURE. I WILL DO MY BEST TO BUILD A SOLID FOUNDATION FOR OUR ANIMA ORDER SO THAT NO MATTER WHAT MAY HAPPEN AFTER MY TERM HAS COME TO AN END, YOU WILL ALWAYS BE ABLE TO COUNT ON OUR ORGANIZATION TO HAVE YOUR BACK. NEVER FORGET THAT THERE IS A PURPOSE TO LIFE!"

"PURPOSE TO LIFE!"

"PURPOSE TO LIFE!"

"PURPOSE TO LIFE!"

The Anima Order officially started its operations!

Chapter 4590 New Organization

In the end, the crowning of the Everchanger energized every living mech of the Larkinson Clan.

They became more hopeful and optimistic about the future as they finally gained a collective voice to speak on their behalf!

By becoming more organized, they could not only sort out all of the internal issues that had piled up over the years, but also work towards improving their relationships with other external partners.

The Everchanger already published a modest list of short-term goals, from giving living mechs the right to experience life among the humans by controlling mechanical cat avatars, to giving them greater choice in picking their own mech pilots.

Many of the expert hybrid mech's goals required the cooperation of the Larkinson Clan in order to implement. This was also one of the reasons why the Everchanger emphasized the importance of maintaining a fruitful relationship with humans.

Once the inauguration ceremony had come to an end, all of the living mechs began to depart the Anima Hall and pull out of the MSTS at their own pace.

The Everchanger only stuck around long enough to chat with the rivals who had lost the first election.

"CONGRATULATIONS, EVERCHANGER." The feminine voice of the Minerva spoke up. "I WOULD HAVE PREFERRED TO WEAR THE CROWN MYSELF, BUT I WILL ENTRUST IT IN YOUR CARE FOR THE UPCOMING TEN YEARS."

The Everchanger's three eyes flashed. "YOU SOUND AWFULLY CONFIDENT THAT YOU WILL BE ABLE TO GATHER THE MOST VOTES IN THE NEXT ELECTION."

Mechs generally didn't have mouths which they could use to express their feelings and emotions. They mostly made do by radiating them directly or making exaggerated physical gestures.

Right now, the Minerva crossed her arms in a clear sign of confidence!

"I AM THE BATTLE PARTNER OF THE SMARTEST AND MOST COMPETENT MECH PILOT OF THE LARKINSON CLAN. I MAY HAVE LOST THIS BATTLE, BUT I WILL BE MUCH BETTER PREPARED THE NEXT TIME NOW THAT I HAVE EXPERIENCED AN 'ELECTION' MYSELF. IN FACT, IT IS BETTER TO ALLOW YOU TO TAKE THE FIRST TURN. I WILL BE IN A MUCH BETTER POSITION TO ENACT MY PROPOSALS WHEN THE ANIMA ORDER HAS GOTTEN OFF THE GROUND."

The Everchanger did not deign to respond to his defeated opponent. He instead turned to the weakest mech among the three.

"WHAT ABOUT YOU, QUINT?"

The gold-coated mech shrugged. "EH, I MIGHT NOT BE CUT OUT FOR THIS BUSINESS. I ONLY TOOK PART IN THE FIRST PLACE BECAUSE IT WAS INTERESTING AND BECAUSE MANY MECHS EXPECT ME TO STAND UP FOR THE 'LITTLE MECHS' THAT AREN'T AS POWERFUL OR VALUABLE AS EXPERT MECHS."

"THAT IS EXACTLY WHY WE NEED YOUR INPUT." The Everchanger said as he raised his arm and placed it on the other mech's shoulder. "AS YOU HAVE SAID, THE MINERVA AND I ARE MECHS ON A DIFFERENT LEVEL. WE DON'T HAVE AS MUCH OF A CONNECTION TO THE 'GRASSROOTS'

AS YOU. I WOULD LIKE TO INVITE YOU TO HELP ME CONVEY THE DEMANDS OF THE ORDINARY MECHS."

The Quint became intrigued. "ARE YOU ASKING ME TO BECOME YOUR ADVISOR? I MIGHT DECIDE TO FORM AN OPPOSITION INSTEAD. IT DEPENDS ON HOW ANNOYING YOU ARE. I'M NOT GOING TO ROLL OVER AND AGREE WITH EVERYTHING YOU SAY."

"WE CAN FIGURE OUT THE DETAILS LATER."

When Venerable Joshua and the Everchanger finally pulled out of the MSTs, the two remained silent for a time. While they remained connected through the neural interface, they both held different thoughts on how the prior event unfolded.

Joshua finally composed his thoughts.

"Congratulations for winning the election." He eventually spoke. "I was banking on your victory and I am glad it is you who has received the right to wear the Secret Crown."

"WELL, I MAY HAVE INHERITED TOO MUCH OF YOUR SAPPINESS TO DEVELOP GREATER AMBITIONS." The Everchanger voice's boomed inside his own cockpit. "I COULD USE YOUR PERSPECTIVE TO OBTAIN A SECOND OPINION OF MY IDEAS, BUT I WON'T BE SHARING EVERYTHING WITH YOU. THE ANIMA ORDER MUST FIRST AND FOREMOST BE AN ORGANIZATION FOR LIVING MECHS, SO HUMANS LIKE YOU SHOULDN'T GET TOO INVOLVED."

"I understand. I don't mean to pry too closely in your business. I trust you to keep your organization on the right track. I will gladly help you when I can. Helping you fulfill your goals during your term will make me feel accomplished as well."

Venerable Joshua had pinned much of his hopes on the cause of the living mechs. As long as he did his part to help the Anima Order grow into a positive influence in human society, he would feel more fulfilled.

He could already feel his willpower becoming more invigorated after this event. Living mechs had taken their first concrete steps to establishing their group, and the following years became a crucial period where they developed their own culture, established their own institutions and set their future aspirations.

As Joshua continued to chat with the Everchanger on what they should do next, Ves processed what had happened within the MSTs.

He had been observing the live feeds provided by the hidden sensors planted in the Ramage Repulsor System.

So far, the Cenatus Prospecting fleet appeared to have taken the bait, just as he expected. He grinned in satisfaction as he saw the ships under the command of Otrus Magrin starting to burn in the direction of the brown dwarf star. They all approached the planet that was orbiting close to the larger stellar object.

"Miaow~"

"I love you too, Clixie~"

Meanwhile, Aurelia sat on his hard lap while affectionately brushing Clixie's coat of fur. She occasionally bent down to plant kisses onto the Rubarthan Sentinel Cat's head.

"Aurelia."

"Yes, papa?"

"Our living mechs have elected their first leader. In the end, the Everchanger has earned the most votes. What is your analysis on the outcome of this election?"

His daughter furrowed her brows for a moment. She kept brushing and stroking Clixie's luxuriously soft fur as she used her overdeveloped mind to decipher the political processes that took place.

She hadn't been able to witness the election in the Anima Hall in person. She could only base her opinions on the limited information provided by her father, but that didn't stop her from using her imagination to fill up the gaps.

The cute girl looked remarkably cute when she was in her serious thinking mode.

"Most living mechs in our clan are treated well." She said in her high-pitched voice. "Since they haven't experienced any trouble with humans, they have less reason to fear us. The voting pattern would have probably looked a lot different if we allowed outside living mechs to cast their vote."

"Clever girl." Ves encouragingly praised. "How do you think the Everchanger will fare over the course of his term? Will he be able to create a lasting legacy or will he end up being remembered as a mediocre leader who failed to achieve anything worthwhile?"

"I think... the Everchanger will be a steady leader." She eventually said as continued to bask in Clixie's warmth. "The mech is uncle Joshua's best friend, so the machine will probably do his best to avoid conflict and focus on fulfilling smaller and easier demands. This will give the Anima Order a lot of confidence in the short term. As for what happens later, I don't know if the Everchanger can keep making progress. It depends on how powerful the Anima Order has become. He won't be able to do as much if the Anima Order is limited to 10,000 mechs."

"Hmm, you make a good point, daughter. The Anima Order is far too limited in scope at the moment. How would you deal with this problem if you have the power to make the necessary changes?"

This was a more complicated question because he wasn't asking Aurelia to analyze an existing circumstance. He was prompting her to use her mind to formulate an action plan.

Normally, a girl who was less than 10 years old should never be able to do this, but Aurelia was anything but a simple child!

Her mind and spirit became more active as she became more engaged in this thought exercise!

"If the Anima Order wants to make a greater difference, it will eventually have to expand its membership. Just like how you have opened up the Larkinson Clan by recruiting outsiders, the Anima Order can gradually absorb outside living mechs, but it doesn't have to do so quickly. The organization can start off small and steadily recruit more after it has become more capable of absorbing the newcomers." Aurelia said.

"What does the Everchanger and the other leaders of the Anima Order have to pay attention to the most when it comes to outside recruitment?"

Aurelia became stumped. For all of her genius-like intellect, she was still a young girl who had too few experiences!

Part of the reason why Ves took the time to tutor her on leadership was to make up for this gap faster.

Ves believed that Aurelia should also have the qualifications to attend a first-class virtual school.

He never entertained the idea of sending her off to one because he previously didn't have the money or the connections to enroll her into such a fancy place.

However, if his little gambit in the Ramage Repulsor System worked out, he might be able get his hands on Lord Pearian Yorul-Tavik anyway.

If that was the case, then he would do his best to convert the gratitude of the Yorul-Tavik into concrete benefits as soon as possible!

After all, why stop with sending just a single kid to a fancy first-class school when he could send all three of his children at the same time? It should hardly make any difference to a powerful first-class family organization!

"Do you have an answer Aurelia?"

"Uh, can I have a hint, pwease?"

Her big, cute eyes were too irresistible to Ves.

"Fine. Think about the most important reason why our Larkinson Clan is limiting the pace of recruitment."

Aurelia knew that there were several possible reasons to impose a quota on recruitment. Common reasons ranged from a shortage of skilled manpower to limited capacity to employ so many people.

She didn't think that any of these reasons was the answer her father was looking for, though.

It took half a minute before her eyes lit up. She figured out the answer!

"It's because of control!" She happily shouted. "You wanted to make sure that most of the people of your clan kept supporting you! If you recruited too many newcomers, they would have stuck to their own views, and that makes it harder for them to accept your leadership. If you keep recruiting smaller groups, our clan can steadily assimilate the newcomers so that they think and act no differently from other Larkinsons. Is that right?"

"Yes." Ves gave her a loving and approving smile. "It seems that you have remembered the lessons on indoctrination. The Larkinson Clan is mine. It

doesn't entirely look that way, but it takes measures like this to maintain my grip over my own organization. It's not wise to be too domineering and keep telling everyone what to think. It is better to rely on the existing cultures and institutions of our clan to transform new recruits into like-minded Larkinsons. As long as the proportion of the latter remains in the majority, this process of indoctrination and assimilation will continue to remain effective. In short, if you end up in a similar position one day, take care to control the expansion of your organization."

Aurelia looked serious as she nodded her cute head. Her lovely black locks of hair shook with her motions.

"I know, papa. I won't disappoint you. I will not fail!"

Ves sighed when he heard that. "I am not going to blame you if you fail. It's okay to mess up. The important part is to learn from your mistakes so that you will be able to do better next time."