

Mech 4631

Chapter 4631 Human Resistance

Lord Pearian had a strong premonition that he was about to die.

He didn't know why he suddenly felt that way, but his fears prompted him to put more strength in his prayers to this mysterious Helena!

"Oh, Daughter of Death, if you truly exist, please shelter me in your generous bosom and protect me from the ravages of death. If this alien vessel is about to blow up, then I ask you to keep this cell block in one piece so that I will be able to survive in the end. If I do manage to make it out, I will make sure to pray to you each and every standard day so that I will always be reminded of the grace that you have bestowed to me in my hour of greatest need!"

As Pearian sped up his words as if that would increase his appeal to a greater deity, his cell suddenly became engulfed by an ominous, semi-transparent wave of energy that sparked so much alarm inside of him that he almost felt as if his soul was to separate from his body!

"Ahhh! What is happening?!"

The first-class scion barely had any time to process what had happened before his cell became engulfed by another energy wave!

"Not again!"

A third one followed in an instant that caused his deactivated implants to quiver!

"When will this stop!"

And a fourth one caused his body to feel a little bit more hungry and devoid of energy than before!

"Please kill me now... no wait! I didn't mean that! Save me... Helena..."

Thankfully for the poor human captive, no further death waves engulfed the alien battleship. Lord Pearian finally collapsed onto the deck as what had taken place finally appeared to be over!

"I'm... I'm alive... hahahaha! I am still alive!"

As the first-rater celebrated his survival from a force that was too powerful for him to comprehend, another human individual happened to survive this ordeal as well!

When the initial wave of death energy coursed through the bridge of the alien vessel, Jugal Meren personally saw how many of aliens crewing the various stations became profoundly affected by a phenomena that he had only faintly read about in one of his past daily status updates!

As a diplomat and a liaison who constantly had to work alongside aliens, information was extremely crucial to his job.

The cosmopolitan periodically received a condensed news digest that he was rapidly able to process to reduce the possibility of getting caught off-guard by a recent development.

He absorbed news related to many different subjects, and considering that the ship he was on currently resided in a turbulent border region, he requested a large amount of news about the happenings in the surrounding areas.

The battle that took place in the Boryan System was just one of many fights that took place in the border region. It only merited a few paragraphs at most and only made a single reference to a method of attack that ostensibly wiped out the crews of entire warships.

Jugal Meren recalled that he was only mildly surprised at this feat. He noted down the name of the pioneering organizations responsible for producing this feat but otherwise moved on to processing more important news.

His excellent augmented memory allowed him to identify the attacking force and recall what they had famed for doing just a month or so prior!

This was why he was the only person aboard the alien ship who had an inkling of what was coming!

It turned out that this force was more terrible than he initially imagined!

He truly understood now how this energy attack could snuff out all life inside a starship!

Jugal Meren knew that trying to resist it by force was pointless to him, so he did the only thing he was capable of and essentially begged the source of this power to spare his life!

As a part of himself felt as if he was brushing against an immensely lethal force, he pleaded so much that he could think of nothing else but make promises that he couldn't even recall!

Half of the bodies on the bridge collapsed. The rest jerked back as if they were struck on the head!

"Yuuahaahwaw!"

"Uuuwhaehw!"

"Kriiiwanewai!"

Various alien wails escaped the throats of the aliens who surprised the death energy wave! Each of them suffered so badly that they felt a pain in the innermost part of themselves that could not be remedied by any medicines or treatment!

Yet just as these hardier nunsers and puelmers managed to cling onto their lives, several more waves coursed through the bridge in quick succession!

With each subsequent pass, the amount of aliens who managed to stay alive decreased to an alarming degree.

By the time the final wave had passed through the hull of the alien vessel, no one on the bridge was alive except for a single human who had prostrated himself onto the deck in utter submission to the greater power that had reaped so many souls.

Jugal Meren's body shook in utter fear, but the cosmopolitan did not dare to raise his body and assume that the crisis had passed!

He and Lord Pearian Yorul-Tavik happened to be among the exceedingly small group of individuals who managed to survive the successive waves of death.

Yet they were not the only humans who endured this great test!

Unlike them, there was also a third human who became affected by some of the waves of death, and it just so happened to be the mech pilot of the first-class multipurpose mech that had been fighting against the Mars!

The mech pilot had to exert his full concentration on the fight in order to keep up with the powerful second-class ace mech, so he was unable to respond in time when one of the death energy waves was about to pass through his machine!

Unlike the Mars that could rely on its formidable Saint Kingdom to shield Patriarch Reginald from this threat, the mech pilot of a highly advanced first-class mech enjoyed no such protection!

In fact, Reginald even took the initiative to distance himself from his opponent and retract his Saint Kingdom as much as possible to ensure that he did not inadvertently save his opponent!

While he wanted to defeat the enemy mech through his own strength, he felt that the mech with a disgustingly strong transphasic energy shield might choose to run before it could be beaten.

Rather than let this powerful first-class mech escape his grasp, Reginald would rather allow his allies to claim the honor of defeating the first-class opponent of the Golden Skull Alliance.

A part of the ace pilot was also curious whether the trump card of the Penitent Sisters and the Glory Seekers would work against the pilots of first-class multipurpose mechs. He learned that their neural interfaces were much more special and provided a lot more protection against different effects.

Though the death energy wave unleashed by the Penitent Sister battle formation did not spill beyond the hull of the alien battleship, the other waves released by the Glory Seekers did manage to wash through the first-class mech!

Just as the Golden Skullers had anticipated, the transphasic energy shield and transphasic armor system failed to block this esoteric attack! Not even the first-raters had developed any tech that could specifically defend against this phenomenon.

As the first wave passed through the first-class mech, the machine did not actually glitch and stutter as was the case with the alien battleship.

The first-class mech was much more resilient, as it should be considering that it was built to endure the rigors of battle!

The second wave produced a stronger effect. Though it did not affect the frame of the expensive, it nonetheless targeted both weaknesses of the human mech pilot at once!

On one hand, the pilot's battered spirit received another serious blow.

On the other hand, his physical body grew weaker and less energetic!

Amazingly enough, this double whammy did not kill the first-class mech pilot outright, but the incredibly skilled and talented soldier had to rely on the utmost of his top-class augmentations and training to keep his body and soul together!

Not only that, but he had to draw on whatever support his first-class multipurpose mech could give him in order to give him the resilience to hang on to his life!

However, he managed to survive in the end.

Though the first-class pilot felt utterly drained in the end, he still managed to survive an attack that was lethal to the vast majority of humans!

"DON'T GET DISTRACTED!"

The first-class mech suffered an astonishingly heavy series of blows when the Mars charged up and attacked with all of its available weapons in quick succession!

The weakened first-class pilot came under greater suppression as soon as the Saint Kingdom of the Mars pressed on him again!

First, the ace mech struck the first-class mech with all of the integrated energy weapons of the ARCEUS System!

The transphasic energy shield which had resisted many attacks already began to show more serious flaws.

Second, the Mars fired its transphasic shotgun at the first-class mech.

Instead of firing out a spray of pellets, the weapon instead launched a solid, heavy slug that thundered against the unstable energy shield with the force of a hammer!

Third, the Mars swung its transphasic axe straight at the area of the energy shield that had already endured a lot of stress.

When the weapon finally struck the energy barrier, the latter exploded as it finally couldn't withstand the fury of an ace mech any longer!

"No!"

The exposed first-class multipurpose mech automatically initiated a series of defensive moves at this time.

The mech not only activated a powerful set of boosters that pushed the machine backwards, but also burst out a huge amount of smoke, heat, sensor-blocking particles and more junk in order to prevent any follow-up attacks from striking the machine.

On top of that, the sophisticated mech also began to activate its minidrive so that it could warp out of this extremely dangerous area as soon as possible!

"DID I SAY YOU COULD LEAVE, TRAITOR?!"

Yet before the first-class multipurpose mech could get much further, a large axe spun forward like a wheel and struck the machine in the back with unerring accuracy!

While the resonance-empowered axe did not manage to penetrate the tough rear armor of the powerful machine, it did manage to strike and inflict serious damage onto the flight system and minidrive mounted on the back!

The first-class multipurpose mech's mobility became impaired!

The Mars flew past the obscuring cloud and engaged its ARCEUS System once again, striking several weak points on the exposed and damaged rear.

This time, the resonance-empowered positron beams inflicted real damage onto the first-class mech!

Not only did the attacks damage or disable numerous rear weapon ports, but they also took out a few maneuvering thrusters, which further impaired the expensive machine's mobility!

The approaching ace hybrid mech had already put away its shotgun this time. It now held its Whale-Cutting Saber, which Reginald considered to be the most fitting weapon to hack apart a first-class multipurpose mech!

"DIE, TRAITOR!"

At this time, there was little his opponent could do. The first-class mech could no longer run away while its mech pilot had become unprecedentedly weak!

"ONE!"

The glowing heavy saber chopped off a forearm at the relatively weak elbow joint!

"TWO!"

The Mars spun around and made an identical chop that cut off the other forearm!

"THREE!"

This time, the ace mech utilized its momentum to hack its sharp and heavy saber through a foreleg!

"FOUR!"

Another foreleg spun away into open space!

Though the first-class multipurpose mech still had more than enough intact modules to put up a bit of resistance, its mech pilot no longer had the confidence to persist in the fight!

The pilot gritted his teeth. If he was a lesser man with weaker convictions, then he would have offered his surrender to his adversary.

He was stronger than that, though. It only took a split-second for the weak and weary mech pilot to settle on his course of action.

"For a pluralistic society!" The man weakly roared while raising his fist!

The highly advanced power reactor of the first-class multipurpose mech self-destructed, engulfing the entire machine and the immediate surroundings with destructive energies that far exceeded any of its prior attacks!

The Mars barely avoided falling victim to this blast as Reginald sensed the threat in advance and managed to pull back in the nick of time!

The treacherous first-class mech had fallen!

THE MECH TOUCH

Chapter 4632 First-Class Superiority

After the rapid strike force had successfully neutralized the alien battleship as well as the human first-class mech that attempted to defend her, the battle was pretty much over at this point!

The only active combatant remaining in the fight was the powerful phase lord that had fought a hard battle against the expert mechs deployed from the Antonio Cross.

The Trampler of Stars had paid close attention to what had befallen his homeship, and became utterly appalled at what had happened to his ship!

Hardly anyone on his ship was left alive!

No matter how many times he tried to make contact with his subordinates aboard the vessel, no one responded to him anymore.

The vessel had practically turned into a ghost ship by this point! Even if a small quantity of special alien life forms managed to resist the successive blows that could not be blocked through conventional means, they no longer had the numbers to mount an effective resistance.

The ship was gone!

"YYEUAHHAHWA!" The Trampler of Stars roared through space while crashing his forehoofs!

A devastating space quake spread from his massive true body!

Due to his drastic change in size, the shockwave generated by the nunser phase lord spread across a greater area!

None of the expert mechs in the vicinity wanted to get caught up in the destructive spatial area attack, so they quickly retreated in order to minimize the harm they endured.

Yet just after the space quake had run its course without inflicting too much internal damage to the closest expert mechs, the Trampler of Stars did not throw himself at the human forces in order to avenge the alien fallen.

Instead, the nunser phase lord had taken the time to perform an emergency technique that caused him to form a powerful warp bubble around his massive body!

In order to ensure that nothing could interrupt this desperate move, the Trampler of Stars went as far as burning up his own body mass to generate enough energy!

The newly formed warp bubble not only distorted the path of a lot of incoming attacks that were savaging his body, but it also allowed the alien 'god' to quickly distance himself from the human mech force!

"He's trying to make a getaway!"

"Stop this alien!"

"We can't! We don't have the means to interdict his warp travel!"

Ranged expert mechs such as the Amaranto, the Promethea, the Minerva and the Star Dancer Mark II all poured as much damage onto the fleeing phase lord as possible, but none of their efforts yielded any significant results.

The abnormally powerful warp bubble remained extremely resilient and whatever attacks managed to strike the massive body of the phase lord only produced flesh wounds at best.

Eventually, the phase lord managed to accelerate so quickly that he quickly escaped the range of most expert mechs!

"Forget about it." Ves sighed as he spoke over a communication channel.

"Phase lords are highly adept at manipulating phasewater, and their ability to mimic the processes of a warp drive are quite excellent. None of the mechs and starships that we have brought possess the means to stop this fellow from running away."

He doubted whether the recently acquired Gravity Net module installed on the Spirit of Bentheim could stop the phase lord from escaping.

The alien powerhouse possessed so much phasewater in his body that he could resist a lot of different measures to prevent his retreat. This was especially the case when he resorted to an extreme measure like burning up his own body!

Still, Ves had no complaints. The other expert pilots might be bummed that they failed to defeat a formidable opponent that they had all struggled against, but defeating the phase lord was never the main objective of the rapid strike force.

Ves only truly cared about rescuing Lord Pearian Yorul-Tavik from the clutches of these mysterious aliens!

Neutralizing the alien battleship was an incredibly nice bonus and one that would doubtlessly grant his clan incredible profits, but it was just icing on the cake as far as he was concerned.

He could always find a way to gather phasewater and resources elsewhere, but it was much harder to obtain the favor of an established first-class power!

Ves concentrated his mind for a moment.

"Helena. Did you manage to come across Lord Pearian Yorul-Tavik when your power swept through the hull of the alien battleship? Have you managed to keep him alive during the process?"

His sister did not choose to manifest herself in front of him this time. She merely conveyed her words directly to his mind.

"I came across a few humans. One of them was definitely an enemy, so I tried my best to kill him for you. It was a lot harder for me to do so than I thought. He's anything but average and for some reason his connection with his mech provided him with a surprisingly strong form of mental protection. I never encountered so much resistance when my power swept through other mechs in the past!"

Ves did not look particularly surprised by this news. "I suspected that this might be the case. First-class mechs make use of first-class neural interfaces, which are better in every way. I always wondered how the MTA alongside the CFA managed to defeat a certain powerful cult a few hundred years ago. The mechers must have been able to muster an extremely effective countermeasure in order to render the most effective means of the cult invalid. Your inability to kill the pilot of a first-class mech explains it. Spiritual entities such as yourself aren't all-powerful after all. At a certain point, mechs become so strong that they can truly challenge all kinds of powerful opponents."

There were good reasons why the Five Scrolls Compact hated mechs so much. Supposedly, god mechs were so overwhelmingly powerful in battle that they could resist everything that dark gods and spiritual sorcerers could throw at the apex machines!

However, Ves seriously doubted that there were many god mechs and god pilots four centuries ago. How was the MTA able to spank the Five Scrolls Compact so hard that it became an equal partner to the CFA?

If first-class mechs were able to help their mech pilots resist the harmful effects of metaphysical attacks such as death energy battle formations, then that made a lot of sense.

"This... this is not a fair matchup!" Helena petulantly retorted in his mind. "If a first-class mech showed up in the Nyxian Gap, then I have a hundred different ways to make the mech pilot miserable! I'm too far from my home ground over here. Do you know how difficult it is to channel my power and energies through the minds of those weak mech pilots? They can pray to me all they want, but that doesn't change the fact that pushing my power through them is like pushing my body through several thousand tiny straws!"

That was certainly a colorful analogy. Ves understood what she was saying. It was just too difficult for design spirits to affect the material realm.

"I will find a way to improve battle formations in the future so that design spirits such as yourself can more effectively intervene on the battlefield." Ves mentally replied. "Back to my question, have you managed to find and spare Lord Pearian? He's kind of the reason why I bothered to take so many risks."

"About that..."

Ves became wary. "What is it, Helena? Don't tell me you failed to preserve his life."

"No, it's not that, little brother." She replied. "I actually came across two different humans that were both pleading with me to spare their lives. I found their pleas to be rather cute, actually, but I did not manage to remain in contact long enough to figure out which of the two I am supposed to spare."

"What did you do?"

"I decided to spare them both!"

"Oh... Do you know whether one of them was a captive or a collaborator on the alien ship?"

"I don't know. They were located in two different parts of the ship. One of them was surrounded by aliens while the other was on his own. I think the former may be another person, but I couldn't say for sure. Who knows whether the alien officers invited Lord Pearian to them in order to squeeze information out of him. Both of them are fine as far as I know, but you should better hurry up and find out the truth yourself."

"Ah, you're right. Thank you for your help, Helena. I will repay this favor later."

"You better not forget your promise!"

After Helena planted a mental kiss onto Ves' mind, her presence faded away.

By this time, the rest of the elite strike force had already taken the next steps.

"Expert mechs, fall back to the Antonio Cross and stand by to resupply in batches. Remain on guard in case the enemy phase lord returns or hostile reinforcements arrive."

"Penitent Sisters, Glory Seekers, turn around and converge on the alien battleship. Help the Mars secure the exterior of the vessel and make sure that no surviving alien or automated defense program can pose a threat to our assets. Also make sure to secure a route for DIVA. The Hexer commandos

will be leading the effort to extract our primary mission objective from the enemy vessel."

All of these moves would take a fair amount of time to execute. The mechs and ships that had just flown past the Tower of Babel were still moving away at a rapid speed and needed to spend a lot of time to gradually reverse their travel direction.

That left the Patriarch Reginald and the Mars on their own for the time being.

Fortunately, the ace mech was more than capable of taking care of itself.

Reginald even asked if it was okay to destroy the remaining surviving weapon batteries just in case they could go active again.

This was a difficult decision as leaving as much of the ship intact as possible would preserve more value.

Ves and Master Benedict briefly exchanged glances before the latter issued a response.

"You should proceed to destroy the gun batteries that I am in the process of pointing out. You do not need to strike them with your most powerful attacks. Just target the modules or sections that I have highlighted for you on the command net. You can keep the remainder intact as they cannot target anything that is situated outside of their firing angles."

"Will do."

Patriarch Reginald no longer felt excited anymore, so he mechanically completed this essential chore.

The Tower of Babel was slowly rendered harmless. Even if a batch of surviving crew members could take over control of all of her intact ship systems, they no longer possessed the ability to fend off the rapid strike force!

The only way the aliens could ruin this outcome was if they killed Lord Pearian Yorul-Tavik or initiated a self-destruct sequence.

"Hurry up, please. We need to put boots on this ship as soon as possible! The longer she remains outside of our control, the greater the chance that uncontrollable factors will come into play."

Though the delay was agonizingly long for Ves, he eventually sighed in relief as the first DIVA vehicles managed to dock alongside the damaged and diminished alien battleship.

DIVA commandos wearing a variety of different armor and equipment rapidly made their way inside the alien vessel through one of her many gaps.

More troops were on their way to speed up the takeover process.

When Ves patched into one of the feeds of the helmets of the DIVA commandos, he and many other people fell silent as they observed the actual situation of the ship.

"So many bodies."

Only a short time had passed, but already the DIVA squad moved past hundreds of inert alien bodies.

The ship had turned eerily silent now that so much of the crew had entered into a permanent state of sleep!

Chapter 4633 Serious Enemy

The Second Battle of Ramage Repulsor had come to a conclusion!

Unlike the first battle which was fought between Otrus Magrin's vulture fleet and the hybrid alien battleship, the second battle ended in a decisive victory for the human side!

By exploiting the advantages accrued during the first battle as well as favorable information asymmetry, the masterminds who engineered the Tower of Babel's downfall succeeded in attaining their desired outcome!

Certainly, not everything was optimal. A few unanticipated surprises such as the appearance of a powerful phase lord and the emergence of a human first-class multipurpose mech tested the fault tolerance of the rapid strike force.

Nonetheless, the Golden Skullers managed to prevail against these difficulties. Not only did they come under the possession of a crippled but surprisingly intact rear half of a modern alien battleship, they also managed to 'preserve' the bodies of tens of thousands of alien crew members!

While it was a pity that none of them possessed any consciousness anymore, the fact that their bodies remained in excellent condition despite losing all resistance was incredibly valuable in itself!

Ves had already contacted the MTA on what the Golden Skull Alliance managed to do and what it had managed to obtain.

Master Vayro Goldstein of the Survivalist Faction initially did not display any exaggerated reactions. The MTA's formidable warfleets already possessed the capability to capture any alien warship as long as the organization was willing to pay a price.

"We are familiar with the unusual ship that you have captured." The bald and caped MTA Master spoke over a reasonably secure channel. "Our forces have fought against the alien faction known as the 'Red Cabal' multiple times. This multi-species gathering has accrued a great amount of influence among the native alien communities. There are strong indications that it will soon become the leading force of resistance against our invasion. Any ship that is built by them is therefore a valuable source of intelligence. We are especially interested to know if her data banks are still intact."

Ves smiled back. "We only managed to retain the rear half of the alien battleship, so I cannot say if we have managed to preserve all of her data storage facilities. I do have good news, though. The engineers that we have sent to secure the vessel from within have encountered several compartments that appear to hold a lot of data. Our data specialists have examined the devices but have refrained from touching anything for fear of triggering a self-destruct command."

Master Goldstein grew a little bit more enthused. "We would like you to connect your specialists to one of our alien technology acquisition teams that I will be referring to you. Our own experts are much more familiar with alien technology and can help your troops maintain the stability and integrity of the captured ship to the greatest extent possible. We believe it is unlikely for the aliens to implement strict checks against capture that will lead to self-destruction in the near-term, but it is best to verify the actual condition of the vessel."

"Uh, okay. There is more."

When Ves spoke about the presence of human traitors, Master Goldstein's mood and expression completely changed!

Previously, Ves always thought that the MTA Master was rather plain but direct. The man clearly wanted to deal with his business in a clean and efficient manner. Yet when he heard that a first-class multipurpose mech showed up and displayed enough strength to fend off a second-class ace mech like the Mars, the mecher became completely affronted!

"This is unacceptable!" The man snarled as his eyes burned with hatred. "The traitors among our people have hindered us far too much. Not only have they slowed our advance, but they have also reduced the technology disparity between us and the aliens, thereby contributing to greater losses than we should otherwise incur. We have a standing bounty for all proven traitors that

anyone has managed to kill or capture. Can you confirm that you have encountered at least two possible human traitors?"

Ves expected the MTA to show more interest in the traitors, but not to this extent! It appeared that this was a greater deal than he initially expected.

"Not much time has passed since the battle has ended. We have brought plenty of infantry along, but the intact portions of the alien ship are so expansive that it will take a lot of time to search through every nook and cranny. It doesn't help that our men don't understand how to operate anything on the alien ship. We only recently managed to figure out how to open the hatches without needing to breach the hatches."

"That is not an issue. We will send you an information packet that will help your boarding parties operate elementary functions of the Red Cabal vessel." Master Goldstein said. "Please elaborate on what you found about the human traitors."

"Well, one of them is a traitor without any doubt. The pilot of the first-class multipurpose mech is the most skilled normal mech pilot that our ace pilot has ever fought against. It is too bad that the traitor has opted to die for his cause rather than surrender himself to custody. He self-destructed his expensive mech, so nothing of him is left intact. We only have burnt and scattered shards of his machine."

That wasn't entirely true. The salvage teams had also managed to pick up the relatively intact forearms and forelegs of the first-class multipurpose mech that the Mars managed to amputate.

The limbs apparently hadn't been rigged to blow, so they were still safe and sound for the time being!

Whether Master Goldstein knew about this little detail was not certain. Ves hoped that the mechers became so preoccupied with major issues that they would overlook certain... indiscretions.

Those first-class mech limbs weren't the only loot that Ves wanted abscond with! The entire ship was filled with treasures and it would be an enormous pity if the Golden Skull Alliance transferred all of this booty over to the greedy Association.

Fortunately, Goldstein didn't call Ves out on his little trick.

"Very well. I would like your forces to gather as many of these remains as possible. We can track down where the materials are sourced and may even be able to deduce where the mech has been fabricated. If we are lucky enough, enough biological traces of the traitor may be left to narrow down his identity and background."

"Our salvage parties are still picking up the shards as we speak."

"What is the state of the other traitor?"

Ves turned a little more hesitant. "Ah, that is... a little bit more complicated. We have found two living humans on the ship. One of them is a missing first-class pioneer that we sought to rescue. We are still in the process of verifying his identity, but all of the inspections performed so far have yielded a positive result. It is the other man that we are not entirely certain about."

"Describe the situation of this second individual."

"Our advance troops managed to find him alive on the bridge or command center of the alien vessel. He does not appear to be restrained, but it is uncertain whether he is an alien collaborator or merely another captive that has been granted parole. Our interrogators in the field have attempted to figure out who he is, but he is extremely resistant to such measures. The man

is filled with first-class augmentations including a few unusual biological alterations, though we cannot understand much of their purpose."

Master Goldstein leaned forward. "Send me the data that you have collected on this individual. Please include footage of the initial encounter between your troops and this person."

Ves did so and waited for the MTA Master to process the new information.

It did not take long before Master Goldstein became outraged again!

"I recognize his garb." The man spoke in an acrid tone. "The scans that you have collected on his augmentations also align with what we know of one of our greatest enemies. No ordinary human is willing to modify his body so that he can contort his body to imitate a quadruped alien, and neither is he willing to alter his vocal chords so that he can fluently speak at least 73 different alien languages."

"Uhh... do you know who he is, Master?" Ves carefully asked.

"Hm, there is no harm in telling you. I am 97.3 percent certain that he is a cosmopolitan."

Ves widened his eyes.

"A cosmopolitan?! Really?!"

Cosmopolitans were practically extinct in human space! While Ves heard that pockets of them managed to survive outside human space, they were so rare that no one really talked about them anymore. The relics of the past were supposed to be completely irrelevant to human civilization in modern times.

To see one of these relics of the past reappear in front of him was a considerable surprise!

Goldstein's projection paced back and forth. "There are many traitors among humans, and they can hail from any part of our great society. We have caught

Terrans and Rubarthans trading human high technology for containers filled with phasewater. We have come across abducted mech designers who have taught their craft to their alien captors in order to retain their lives. We have even tracked down third-class pioneers who have chosen to function as couriers in an increasingly more pervasive black market that spans both sides of the conflict in the Red Ocean."

This was pretty natural. So many different people poured into the new frontier that lots of bad apples managed to pass through as well. These greedy people were unable to resist the incredible profits of trading with the aliens.

After all, as far as business went, the indigenous alien civilizations of the Red Ocean suffered so many defeats at the hands of the Big Two's formidable mechs and warships that the natives no longer blindly believed in their own strength!

Just like humanity back in the Age of Stars, the indigenous aliens fully recognized that they were inferior and sought to close the gap as best as possible by acquiring lots of tech and material from their greatest enemy!

As such, a market had formed where the indigenous aliens turned into desperate consumers that were more than willing to pay sky-high prices in order to obtain strategic goods that could help them gain parity against the relentless forces of the Big Two!

Even Ves had moments where he felt tempted to take part in the illicit trade between the races.

He knew better, though. Every pioneer was monitored by the Big Two one way or another. Aside from that, Ves and his clan were scrutinized even more due to his close ties to the Survivalist Faction and the Transhumanist Faction!

There was no way he could trade with the aliens and get away with it! He would be much better off if he continued to abide by the rules set by the Association.

"Cosmopolitans are different from those aforementioned traitors, right?" Ves asked.

Master Goldstein nodded. "Correct. There are plenty of motives to consort with aliens, but most incidents are rooted in selfishness. The people committing treason do not have an overarching agenda beyond enriching themselves. What is truly insidious is if they are betraying humanity for a greater cause. Cosmopolitans are traitors of the worst order because they cannot be reasoned with. They cling to their xenophilic ideology so strongly that they cannot accept a reality where humanity reigns supreme by itself rather than share space with a number of 'allied' alien races. Many generations of cosmopolitans have undergone successive indoctrination that their ideology has no longer become a rational intellectual movement, but rather a pervasive religion that is set on steering our civilization in the wrong direction."

Ves became spooked as he heard this. He knew the cosmopolitans were bad, but hearing about how far they were willing to go to make humans live alongside aliens was frightening!

There was nothing scarier to Ves than misguided faith!

Chapter 4634 Failsafes

Ves continued to report on the state of the captured human prisoner.

"When our troopers initially found the suspected cosmopolitan on the alien bridge, his mental state was poor. He did not resist capture and continued to mumble to himself as we transferred him over to one of my ships."

"That is odd." Master Goldstein frowned. "Cosmopolitans generally do not allow themselves to be captured alive. As true believers of a forbidden cause, they would rather deny us of any benefits than bargain for their lives. The pilot of the first-class multipurpose mech is an example of that. For this suspected diplomat to allow himself to get caught by your men is highly... unusual, though not unprecedented. What is his current state?"

"We currently have an entire team of doctors and security officers keeping watch over him." Ves replied. "We have tried to interrogate him, but we did not apply any heavy interrogation techniques for fear of triggering a failsafe. We also decided not to tamper with his implants or force him to undergo an artificial sleep cycle."

Master Goldstein nodded in approval. "Your precautions are adequate and wise. Every cosmopolitan is known to carry multiple failsafes. The higher their rank and the more vital their responsibilities, the greater their precautions. You should connect your team that is watching over him with one of our counterintelligence agents right away. If too much time has passed without the cosmopolitan making small actions, his cranial implant may decide that he is compromised and will detonate an explosive. This is only one of several possibilities that I have deduced based on the scans that you have transmitted."

Prominent and important first-raters had to carry these kinds of failsafes by necessity. Not doing so would make it far too attractive to kidnap them and force them to cough up lots of sensitive information.

However, few went as far as planting a small explosive inside their own heads!

If any glitch occurred or if anyone hacked the self-destruct function, the unlucky victim had no way of salvaging his life!

Ves would never allow himself to make himself vulnerable to this nightmare scenario!

"Okay, please send me the details."

It took a bit of time to make the arrangements. Once Master Goldstein became assured that the Golden Skullers received proper guidance on how to preserve their gains as much as possible, the man made an announcement.

"I originally planned to divert one of our nearby ships to your current star systems, but the importance of your findings merit a more significant response. I will personally make my way to SDDD-4343X-AER-232666410 so that I can inspect your gains and determine your compensation by myself."

That was a surprise to Ves. He knew that the capture of such a significant alien battleship would have attracted the mechers to him, but for one of the confidantes of the Polymath to make his way over in person was a clear signal that this was a big deal!

"We will await your arrival." Ves promised even as he planned to accelerate any private looting activities before the MTA came and took away the rest.

"When do you expect to arrive at this star system?"

"I will be slightly delayed as I must pass through several destinations. I must also arrange the personnel and ships to establish extensive control over the site. I estimate it will take no later than 36 standard hours to arrive at your location."

"I see."

"Fret not, young mech designer." Master Goldstein smiled. "We have not disregarded your recent contributions. Your actions, though fueled by selfish motives, nonetheless align with our goals. That makes you far better than the rats who can only scurry in the dark due to their continual failings. The Mech Trade Association is always fair and you and your allies shall receive the

compensation you deserve. This is also a convenient opportunity to settle the rewards of defeating an alien pirate base and neutralizing an aberrant member of the phase whale species."

The Golden Skull Alliance had been waiting for that. Ves figured that he would only get to settle all of that when his fleet left the turbulent border region, but now that Master Goldstein was coming, he could easily handle this matter himself given the authority that he possessed.

That was good. The chance that Ves would receive a better reward was much higher now that he had made successive contributions.

As much as a part of Ves felt annoyed that he was being trained to become a dog of the Association, he didn't mind it too much as long as he received sufficient compensation.

Both sides took what they needed from each other. Ves couldn't ask for more since his bargaining power was still poor compared to the vast MTA.

After concluding the call, Ves returned to the command center and immediately issued a series of orders. He wanted his men to speed up the search and salvaging process.

The main expeditionary fleet was already on its way back to the Ramage Repulsor System as well. Once Spirit of Bentheim along with hundreds of other ships arrived, Ves would not lack for manpower to investigate and extract as much value as he could reasonably get away with in a span of 36 hours.

"This is going to be tough." He frowned.

If his salvage teams disregarded everything, they could break the ship apart from the inside and steal everything of great strategic and practical value.

For example, his men could cut away entire power generators, shield generators, intact warship gun batteries and many more powerful technological products.

The alien battleship was freshly built and was in peak condition only a few months ago. Though the successive battles she had been a part of had taken a toll on her systems, many of her intact tech were still good enough that the Larkinsons could install on their own ships!

When Ves thought about mounting a set of orven segmented shield generators on his flagship, he already began to salivate at the thought.

"No!"

He vigorously shook his head.

The chances that he could get away with this was low. Master Goldstein already made it clear that the MTA wanted the ship to be as whole as possible to maximize the amount of intelligence that could be derived from her hull.

Besides, using stolen alien products was an excellent way to introduce vulnerabilities on his own ships. Without reverse-engineering all of the tech, the chances that they could be disabled through a hidden backdoor was too great!

As such, Ves had to resist the urge to order his men to treat the captured alien battleship as a free and unrestricted junkyard.

"It should still be okay if we skim off a bit of phasewater and other spare materials. There is also a lot of debris floating in space that the MTA won't care too much about."

The salvage teams needed to be clever in deciding what to salvage. They had to gather loot that was worthwhile enough to take but not important enough to make the mechers jealous.

It was difficult. The decision to leave most of the phasewater reserves found inside the Tower of Babel was especially painful to Ves, but what could he do? He was at least confident that the MTA would award him with more MTA merits for giving up such a substantial phasewater bounty.

Once he handled all of the necessary affairs, Ves was free to tour his latest acquisitions.

There was much that he wanted to examine in person before the MTA arrived to lay claim to most of the loot, so Ves became eager to make the most of his time.

He already gave Lucky permission to move to the alien battleship so that he could fill up his belly with valuable and yummy first-class exotics.

Ves wanted to step aboard the ship himself so that he could get a better feel and understanding of this odd, multi-racial battleship, but he first needed to check up on a couple of guests.

He took a trip down to the infirmary of the Antonio Cross. A single patient laid quietly on a bed while a bunch of advanced machines worked on his body.

A group of doctors monitored the proceedings and issued various commands to the machines.

"How is our latest guest doing?"

"He is alive and in decent condition." The head doctor replied. "The aliens did not deliberately mistreat Lord Pearian while he was in captivity. He was fed with first-class nutrient packs every day and that has provided him with all of the nutrition he needed to maintain his health and much of his fitness. His implants are disabled and we do not dare to reactivate them for fear of creating health complications. The Yorul-Tavik Clan can deal with this problem once we hand him over. His condition will not worsen while those implants remain dormant."

Ves smiled and lightened up. "That is a relief. We don't want this fellow to die while he is in our custody. That is a worse outcome than not rescuing him at all. Can I have a chat with a fellow?"

"Our guest is currently resting but not asleep. Please allow us to complete this round of examinations first. You can talk to him afterwards, though we recommend that you keep your discussion short. The aliens have neglected to feed him for the past few days and that has made him more lethargic than normal. He has also experienced a succession of mental shocks, so he is not entirely in his right mind."

"I understand. I will be gentle."

It took a few more minutes for the machines to complete their work. The doctors gently transferred Lord Pearian's body to a recovery room where laid on a bed.

When Ves entered the room, he stepped closer and looked down on a man who matched appearance of Lord Pearian Yorul-Tavik to a near-perfect degree.

It seemed that captivity had hardly left a mark on the first-class scion. The only noticeable difference was that Pearian looked a lot more weary and jaded.

His shoulder-length dark hair was naturally smooth and self-combing and he apparently had all of his facial hair follicles removed, so he didn't look scruffy in the slightest.

Even so, the radical differences to his mental state caused his handsome face to look a lot older than before!

No one survived the ordeal that he had been through without going through a lot of growth and maturation.

Ves even had the illusion that he was looking at a younger mirror image of himself. He too experienced similar crises that opened him up to adapt to a crueler and messier galaxy.

"Hey." Ves spoke in a casual and disarming tone.

The man laying on the bed cracked open his eyes. "Are you... the young patriarch that everyone is talking about?"

"I am Ves Larkinson, a Journeyman Mech Designer and the founder and leader of the Larkinson Clan, which is part of the Golden Skull Alliance. A lot of pioneers have been scouring this border region to find you and rescue you from the clutches of the aliens. We happen to be the ones to succeed. It was quite difficult to track down your location seeing as the alien vessel you were on had been hiding inside the atmosphere of a brown dwarf star all this time."

Lord Pearian looked impressed. Though Ves had condensed a lot of information in his words, a first-rater was more than competent enough to digest it all. The rescued man may be tired, but that did not make him stupid.

"How... did you manage to track and rescue me where all others have failed?" He asked in an uncomprehending tone. "From what I have heard and witnessed so far, you people are second-raters. You shouldn't have the strength or technology to discover my whereabouts, track down the ship that was doing a good job of hiding herself and defeating her in battle."

"That... is a long story." Ves smirked. "Would you like to hear how much effort and ingenuity we put into engineering your retrieval?"

"I believe... I have all of the time in this galaxy now that I am freed of that accursed alien ship."

Chapter 4635 Shaping A Narrative

Ves put on a minor performance in front of Lord Pearian Yorul-Tavik.

He weaved a tale that mixed truth with exaggerations and distortions that not only gripped the first-rater, but made him feel more admiration towards the Golden Skull Alliance!

After all, how could a second-class pioneering fleet that was only above average in terms of strength and technological capabilities defeat a first-class alien battleship, one that also happened to host a mighty phase lord?

The Larkinsons, Glory Seekers and Crossers took a lot of risks and put a lot of effort into rescuing Pearian, and Ves wanted to make sure that the first-class scion understood how extraordinary it was for them to succeed!

The excitement, uncertainty and improbable successes embedded in the tale completely captured Lord Pearian's imagination.

The former captive once dreamed of becoming a pioneer himself so that he could go on thrilling adventures. How could he not become mesmerized by the description of a real sequence of events?

Of course, Lord Pearian also asked plenty of questions throughout the retelling. There were many areas that Ves had glossed over for one reason or another.

"From what you have described, there are literally thousands of pioneers in this border region who are doing their utmost to track me down. How did you come across the information that allowed you to discern my location?"

"Before we came and pulled you out of that ship, we attacked a hidden alien stronghold. We managed to capture a lot of alien warships and pieces of a former asteroid base that were still reasonably intact. We discovered that the most powerful alien group that was operating from that hidden base was tied to the Red Cabal, which is the same group that built and crewed the alien battleship where you were residing. We managed to collect enough intelligence to point us in the right direction."

It was impossible for the Golden Skull Alliance to reveal to the MTA or the public that they happened to stumble upon the missing first-class scion by getting directions from a prophet who died centuries ago. He would have to answer way too many sensitive questions!

As such, Ves and Calabast had already cooked up a plausible cover story to explain this unlikely success.

Most of the elements of this excuse happened to be authentic. The Unspoken who originally founded the Palace of Shame were proven vassals to the Red Cabal, and that imprisoned unclean whale also had ties to that same mysterious alien organization.

Hopefully, the MTA would buy this story and refrain from asking too many questions.

Lord Pearian still had more doubts, though. It did not take long for him to make his next inquiry.

"You said you managed to confirm the existence and location of the alien battleship. Why did you not decide to retreat and contact my clan directly? There was no need for you to do all of the hard and dangerous work of defeating the powerful warship. The Yorul-Taviks will most certainly muster up a strong fleet to neutralize the alien vessel and rescue me from captivity. Even if the attempt has failed, the clan will not blame you. Instead, you would have received a gracious reward for your services."

Ves shook his head. "What you have said makes a lot of sense, but I am a pioneer."

"I do not understand."

"Lord Pearian, a pioneer is a human from the old galaxy that is dissatisfied with his or her lot in life and seeks to reach a higher station. The Red Ocean is the best possible environment for us to ascend the societal ladder and

achieve success in a region that still offers many opportunities to us all. Sure, everything is also a lot more dangerous in the new frontier, but that comes with the territory. We all signed for this. We would not be enterprising pioneers if we did not dare to take a crack at this ourselves."

"It doesn't make any sense. The alien battleship is too powerful for you to defeat. You are mad for thinking about challenging one given how your second-class mech army cannot even overcome the vessel's defenses."

"Normally, you are correct, but that is why we manipulated the hell out of the parties involved."

When Ves spoke about luring a vulture fleet to the alien battleship and forcing the two into a highly destructive confrontation, Lord Pearian looked both horrified and impressed!

As a half-baked pioneer and leader, he fully realized how difficult it was to steer two enemies into an unwanted confrontation.

"How?!"

"Ah, that touches upon a couple secrets that we would like to keep for ourselves." Ves coyly smiled and replied. "We don't want to expose all of the strengths that we rely upon to get ahead of our rivals."

A bit of mystique could go a long way into painting the Golden Skull Alliance in a better light.

What Ves sought to accomplish here was to paint an image of power, ingenuity and most importantly success.

As the first point of contact with the Yorul-Taviks, the impression that Lord Pearian developed of his rescuers would play a major role in how his powerful and influential clan would treat the Larkinson Clan!

As such, Ves had to do everything he could to amaze and dazzle the man. He needed to persuade Pearian that it was worthwhile for the Yorul-Tavik Clan to build ties with the Larkinson Clan despite the fact that it was only a second-class organization.

As Ves went on to describe the tragic battle fought between the vulture fleet and the alien battleship, the former captive looked sympathetic.

"Huh. These Magrins deserve a reward for contributing to the downfall of the alien battleship and helping me get freed." The first-rater spoke.

"They don't." Ves immediately retorted. "Cenatus Prospecting deserves no sympathy or acknowledgement. If you read up on its history and the record of its founder, you will quickly change your mind. Otrus Magrin has caused the downfall of many people. It is only just for him to meet his end at the hand of one of our ploys. Who told him to stalk our fleet? He and his forces merely bit off more than they could chew this time."

The human survivors of the First Battle of Ramage Repulsor were a problem for the Golden Skull Alliance.

A powerful and talented ace pilot managed to escape with his life and mech intact, and most definitely developed a grudge against the parties who were ultimately responsible for causing his father to die.

Though Ves dearly wanted to nip this problem in the bud, there was not much he and his forces could do about this complication.

Hopefully Saint Neville Magrin wouldn't take the death of his father too harshly. Perhaps he might even realize that his father had brainwashed him and taken advantage of him for his entire life.

"So the efforts of the first battle has allowed you to swoop in and land the killing blow on the battleship?"

"Yes. It was not easy, though. We needed to act quickly and could only bring a limited amount of forces along."

The battle that Ves described was glorious.

The descriptions of the phase king and how many different expert mech struggled against this alien powerhouse sounded like an epic from an ancient tale.

The braveness of Patriarch Reginald for challenging both an alien battleship, if damaged, as well as a fully functional first-class multipurpose mech also caused Lord Pearian to react with amazement!

The man became oddly fixated on the first-class mech.

"Your ace mech succeeded in defeating the traitor mech, correct?"

"That is right, Pearian. Patriarch Reginald Cross managed to oppress the first-class mech and mech pilot so badly that the latter decided to blow up his own machine!"

The former captive scowled. "Typical. It is too cheap for these cosmopolitans to take refuge in death. Did your forces manage to capture or kill another human by the way? He normally wears a purple robe and a silver mask."

Ves activated a small projection from his comm. "You mean this fellow?"

"THAT'S HIM!" Lord Pearian angrily roared! "That is Jugal Meren! Is the traitor still alive? Bring me to his cell so that I can stuff a hundred nutrient packs down his throat before I strangle him to death!"

"Whoa, there! Let's not get too excited here. You are still recovering from a difficult ordeal, and besides, the MTA has already laid claim on this Jugal Meren."

The man's expression dropped. "Oh. I understand. The mechers cannot be defied. Mr. Meren will most certainly enjoy an unpleasant stay in their company. I will have to make do with resolution."

"I take it that the two of you haven spoken." Ves remarked.

"We did. It was not a pleasant conversation." Lord Pearian wearily replied. "I have seen the cosmopolitan consort with the aliens aboard the vessel in the most abject, servile and humiliating fashion possible. It is a sight that I would rather be without."

The two talked a bit more about the Jugal Meren, but Lord Pearian did not know much about the cosmopolitan diplomat to say anything useful.

"Let me ask you another question, Mr. Larkinson. What in the name of mechs did you do to finally defeat the alien battleship, and what does Helena have anything to do with it? Why did the nanomachines that you somehow managed to slip inside the ship warn me that I needed to pray to this woman?"

Ves smirked again. "Those are two questions, Lord Pearian. I am afraid I have to disappoint you in part. The measures we have employed to eliminate all effective resistance from the alien battleship is a proprietary secret of our alliance. Forgive me for withholding information on our trump card. You are free to look us up on the galactic net at a later date if you want to learn what the public knows about our capabilities. As for the second question, well... what do you think of Helena?"

"I... do not have any coherent thoughts about her." Pearian said in a tone that clearly showed how ambivalent he was about this matter. "When those strange but immensely powerful energies washed through my body multiple times, I truly felt I was one step away from death. At that time, there was nothing I could do to defend myself against it, so I followed your secret instructions and... prayed to Helena."

"Are you a secularist?"

"Our clan encourages us to maintain our distance from religion, but keep an open mind towards different faiths."

"Has that changed after your recent experiences?"

"..."

Ves let out a sigh and patted Pearian's shoulder with his armored hand. "It is not my place to tell you what to believe. It is not my intention to convert you to a belief either."

"The message you sent me leads me to believe otherwise." Pearian bitterly said. "What is worse is that it may be too late for me to go back. I made a lot of promises during that crucial interval of time. I do not look forward to tempting fate by turning my back on my word. I was raised to be better than that, and if there is one lesson that I have learned from this disaster of an expedition, it is that I should have respected the wisdom of my teachers."

"That is a good attitude for you to take. Whatever you decide to do with Helena, it can't hurt to be cautious. Remember that you have been marked by death. It can be both a blessing or a curse depending on your decisions. Do not make the wrong choice."

That was all of the help that Ves was willing to provide to his eldest sister. He was quite reluctant to tell Pearian to worship Helena like a god, even though the advantages of doing so were immense.

If Pearian turned himself into a devotee of Helena, then that would mean that he would indirectly become beholden to the Larkinson Clan!

Of course, Ves did not dare to think that he could control Lord Pearian. The Yorul-Taviks would not allow their core members to become compromised.

Any untoward actions would immediately trigger alarms and cause Pearian to undergo extensive examinations.

If the Yorul-Tavik Clan had any suspicion that one of their own had been indoctrinated, then Lord Pearian would probably receive extensive mental deprogramming treatment to turn him back to 'normal'.

This was another reason why Ves did not want to push the Helena angle too hard. Those first-raters were way too sensitive to subversion.

Chapter 4636 Scheduled Pickup

As Ves concluded his chat with Lord Pearian Yorul-Tavik, he gained much more insight of the first-class scion as a person.

In the past, Ves had one bad experience with living through the body of a descendant of a powerful first-class family organization. That caused him to develop a prejudice towards others of his kind.

This was not entirely fair. There were plenty of proper, well-run clans and families that put a much tighter rein on their younger generation of members, particularly when they were groomed for future leadership positions.

However, there were always more descendants than a clan could support to the highest standards.

Resources were limited and they needed to be spent in the most rational and optimal fashion as possible to ensure the stability and continuation of a clan.

Many different factors determined how well and how strictly the clan raised a child. The status of the parents, the designer baby formula, the early cognitive performance parameters and networking ability all played a role in the most important decisions of an offspring's future life.

From that perspective, it became clear to Ves that Axelar Streon had not been a particularly important descendant. His initial position in the Streon Clan was rather marginal, which meant that neither his parents nor the clan

administration as a whole demanded much of him. It would be nice if he became accomplished in his life, but it was fine if he amounted to nothing.

Now that Ves was able to talk to Pearian and study his spirituality up close, he understood that Pearian was not as decadent, clueless and devoid of intelligence as Axelar back in the day.

Pearian likely held a slightly more important status among the Yorul-Taviks. Otherwise, the clan wouldn't have issued such a high-profile request for his return.

The thirty-ish year old man was not a core descendant, however. He wouldn't have been allowed to become a pioneer and start a foolhardy plan to gallivate across the new frontier if that was the case.

His actual status sat somewhere in between. He was important enough to provide him with better and more attentive education, but he lacked the qualification to become a part of the core hierarchy of his clan.

It made more sense now why Pearian was so eager to make such a radical change in his life.

His position in his clan wasn't bad per se, but it must be suffocating for him to know that unless he delivered such an excellent performance that he could beat almost all of his peers, he would never be able to gain the appreciation of the bigwigs.

At least a pioneer was able to build a little empire of his own that was only tragically connected to the Yorul-Tavik Clan.

Whatever intentions Lord Pearian originally possessed, all of those hopes and dreams had come crashing down after losing pretty much his entire pioneering fleet and all of the resources invested into its formation.

The amount of MTA credits, MTA merits, first-class resources, first-class manpower, first-class starships, first-class mechs and other incredibly expensive items that had gone down the drain was unimaginable!

Perhaps the Yorul-Tavik Clan was large and wealthy enough to absorb this loss, but that didn't mean that its leaders and elders would be happy at getting zero returns on their investment!

If he was in their position, he would have decided to leave Pearian for dead and never bother to issue a reward for his return!

However, that did not happen. The clan exhibited unusually merciful and forgiving behavior towards a numbskull that had already proven his ability to screw up in a catastrophic manner. Who would ever want to put him in an important position in his clan again?

Ves was likely missing an important piece of the puzzle. Though he had read the intelligence that the Black Cats gathered on Lord Pearian Yorul-Tavik multiple times, none of it mentioned anything remarkable.

He was neither the illegitimate lovechild of the clan patriarch nor possessed golden genes that granted him the ability to infer future events based on sporadic data.

This made it difficult for Ves to figure out how much of a voice that Pearian possessed in the clan. Would he become significant enough to encourage his Yorul-Taviks to invest into a relationship with the Larkinson Clan?

This was an important question and one that would sadly remained unanswered.

Though Ves could have asked for clarification from Lord Pearian, it was not wise to do as it would make their relationship too transactional.

No matter what, Ves did not want to establish a one-off transaction with the Yorul-Taviks that would end as soon as the latter paid off their perceived debts.

What Ves truly wanted was to establish a long-term and enduring friendship with a reliable and grateful group of first-raters!

He was sure that Pearian was aware of what Ves wanted. This shouldn't be the first time that the first-class scion became the target of an influencing campaign.

However, the Larkinsons had risked much and went above and beyond to save the poor fellow, so it was much more acceptable to build bridges this time.

Ves had also done his best to paint his clan in the best possible light without going overboard. Once Lord Pearian returned to his clan, he should at least develop a much better evaluation of second-raters and the Larkinsons in particular.

"When... will you bring me to my clan?" Pearian wearily asked. "Can you give me access to a comm so that I can call my clan and tell them that I am alive and well?"

An uncomfortable expression appeared on Ves' face. "I am afraid I will have to ask you to be patient. Your identity is rather... sensitive at the moment. If your current state and location becomes exposed, all kinds of pioneering fleets will head straight towards our coordinates and seek to grab you, either to claim the rewards offered by your clan or to hand you over to your enemies and earn a different bounty. You don't want that to happen, don't you, Lord Pearian?"

The ex-pioneer grimaced. He had experienced so much darkness as of late that he had a much better understanding of how low that people could go in the frontier.

"I agree. What is your plan? I can wait until the time is right, but I do not want to remain in isolation for long. The more time passes by, the more my importance will fade to the clan."

"Well, you are in luck, because you don't need to wait too long. A ship or fleet from the MTA is scheduled to arrive in this star system within two days. Once the mechers enter the scene, no human or alien dares to mess around with us. I think that it would be safe for us to announce your rescue from the aliens and grant you the opportunity to reconnect with your clan. I am sure that you Yorul-Taviks have an existing relationship with the Association. I don't think it would be troublesome to call a favor and have you transferred to an MTA vessel that can bring you back to civilized space."

Pearian frowned for a moment. "That is... possible, but it will cost us. The Mech Trade Association will not be eager to provide me a service. I am a failure and have produced an enormous net loss ever since I went into operation. The clan will have to surrender more MTA merits I suppose."

This was the best solution as far as Ves could think of. He did not want to take the risk of transporting such a wanted figure across the border region himself. It was too difficult to hide the news of Pearian's rescue, and the number of pioneers in the surroundings who had a few screws loose in their heads was too great!

Ves patted the other man's shoulder once again. "Well, that is all for now. I have been told that you need a good rest in order to recover from everything that you have gone through as of late. My men or I would be welcome to give you a tour throughout our fleet once you have recovered to an extent. Our clan and alliance will always be open to you. I suggest you take a lot of what

we have at least once before you leave. Our ships and tech may be shabby, but we possess specialties that even first-raters cannot match."

With that, he left Pearian's side so that the former captive could stew on what he had learned.

Now that he got that out of the way, Ves proceeded to another section of the Antonio Cross.

The second human survivor that the DIVA commandos managed to extract from the alien battleship was a much more interesting fellow.

"So this is a member of the legendary Cosmopolitan Movement." Ves uttered as he looked through the transparent safety screens of a secure compartment.

Due to the special circumstances of the man known as Jugal Meren, he had been moved out of his former cell and put into a recently-emptied cargo compartment.

The reason for that was because they needed room to fit the Everchanger!

Right now, the mech was put in a dormant state, but his currently active glow had switched to that of Lufa.

This was the surprisingly creative and unorthodox solution that the Larkinsons and the mechers came up with after a brainstorming session!

The Golden Skull Alliance did not possess the tech or expertise to adequately hold a prisoner of this caliber.

Though Mr. Meren appeared to be lost when he was first discovered, once he sobered and got over his mental shock, he might decide to commit suicide and there was nothing the Larkinsons could do to stop this action.

Knocking him out would just cause him to miss specifically timed requirements that prevent his body from self-destructing itself.

Letting him stay awake and conscious would only allow him to trigger his own suicide whenever he wished!

This was where the Everchanger could play a useful role.

The tranquility glow he radiated from his frame put the alleged human traitor under a state of forced calm.

The living mech and the Larkinsons carefully controlled the distance and the strength of the glow to hit a good sweet spot.

They wanted to blank out Mr. Meren just enough to sap his initiative but not enough to the point where he became completely numb.

Theoretically, the middle state he was in right now should cause him to reflexively hit the timed checks to prevent his body from blowing up, but not much more.

A team of doctors and specialists were constantly monitoring the cosmopolitan's physiological state to ensure that it worked out. If Jugal Meren showed any elevated brain activity, the floating bed he was strapped upon would quickly move closer to the Everchanger.

"Is he in a condition to talk?" Ves curiously asked the security captain in charge of this delicate but important operation.

"I am afraid not, sir." The Crosser replied. "You can look, but the mechers will howl if we want to do anything else with him. They want him to remain as pristine and unspoiled as possible so that they can work their own interrogation methods against him. From what I have been able to gather from my talks with their liaison, it is rare for the Mech Trade Association to capture a cosmopolitan alive, especially one that ranks higher than cannon fodder. The only reliable way the mechers could ever catch them was by putting them in stasis."

"Makes sense. Well, can I get a little closer so I can take a better look?"

"Sure, but be sure to step no further than the line projected on the deck."

Ves slowly approached the bed where the cosmopolitan rested. The Everchanger's glow already started to brush against his mind and spirit, but he easily resisted Lufa's influence.

Once he came as close as he could, Ves laid his eyes and other senses on the cosmopolitan.

The contact was... disappointing.

From what he learned, the cosmopolitans were the humans who interacted the most with aliens.

Ves hoped that the captive might possess an unusual body, mind or spirit that showed clear instances of alien hybridization that provided him with clear advantages.

Unfortunately, none of those transformations affected the man's spirit, because it was dull just like that of Lord Pearian.

The man did not possess any special presence of inner strength worth noticing. He was just a relatively mundane human who went astray.

Chapter 4637 Claiming Body Parts

Compared to gazing at an imprisoned cosmopolitan who wasn't in a condition to talk, Ves much preferred to spend his time on studying his spoils.

The first batch of treasures consisted of the separated forearms and forelegs of the first-class multipurpose mech that presumably fought for the cosmopolitans.

Though the main chassis of the incredibly valuable first-class mech had been blown to bits, the aforementioned limbs were in a remarkably good condition!

When Ves entered the workshop aboard the Antonio Cross that Master Benedict Cortez had converted into his personal tinkering space, the four limbs had been neatly placed in the middle of the compartment.

Each of them gleamed as if they had just been polished. Their metallic surfaces exhibited no scratches or impact marks. This was mainly because the first-class multipurpose mech had been covered by its exceptionally powerful transphasic energy shield throughout most of its duel against the Mars.

"Have you learned anything new now that you have a chance to examine them up close?" Ves inquired.

Master Benedict turned away from the exposed circuitry and channels of one of the mech forearms.

"I have learned many details, but none that can bring us closer to identifying the designers or the producers of the machine." The older man spoke in a disappointed tone. "There are no apparent flaws. Every step of the supply chain has been accounted for. The cosmopolitans are highly professional and thorough in their work. It is incredible, to be honest. Everyone tends to make mistakes. It only takes a single weak link to slip up, and in my experience that happens all too often."

Ves narrowed his eyes. "What are you saying?"

"The degree of skill, planning, forethought and discipline shown in fabricating and utilizing these pieces cannot be matched by a scruffy guerilla movement. Either the Cosmopolitans have managed to develop a parallel society that is far larger and more developed than we thought, or..."

"The Cosmopolitans are embedded in high circles in human society." Ves finished for the Master.

"I do not dare to make any statements on how extensive the cosmopolitans have infiltrated first-rate states, but... I wouldn't be surprised if that is truly the case."

Now that was an ominous thought. If traitors to the human race had truly managed to root in states such as the Greater Terran United Confederation and the New Rubarth Empire, then the cosmopolitans would have the access, funding, resources and most importantly connections to commit a lot of dastardly deeds!

However, what did this have to do with Ves? He was not a self-appointed guardian of human civilization. There was nothing he could do to affect the power balance between the Cosmopolitan Movement and the Mech Trade Association. He was still a small and trivial Journeyman Mech Designer!

Master Benedict didn't care too much about cosmopolitans either. After he discovered that figuring out the origin of the mech parts was not easy, he decisively gave up on this investigation and turned his attention to the potential applications of all of this gear.

"The alloys, circuits, modules and so on are all powerful." He told Ves. "In fact, they are close to the top-of-the-line pieces that you can expect from a modern first-class multipurpose mech. It's a terrible shame that the rest of the frame has shattered into damaged and partially salvaged pieces. We would have been able to construct a lesser-performing but still functional first-class mech if the pilot hadn't decided to self-destruct his machine."

Ves shrugged. "Let's not get ahead of ourselves. We are still second-class pioneers, remember? The moment we field a complete first-class mech, we automatically turn into first-raters, which will force us to play in a much more dangerous playground."

"Correct."

The only way to make good use of this equipment was to break them all up and use individual modules and materials to selectively upgrade their most valuable mechs.

Master Benedict grinned like a shark. "Compared to the salvage that we can obtain from the Tower of Babel, the specifications of these mech parts are all superior. That is not to say the alien battleship is an inferior product, but she is mainly strong due to her scale, not her material quality. When it comes to building any starship, it is too easy to run out of resources or blow past your budget when you use the best possible materials to build an entire hull. Not even the Common Fleet Alliance can afford to build kilometers-long capital ships at this level."

Ves nodded in understanding. "I know. The Tower of Babel may be largely built out of first-class materials, but most of them tend to be available in bulk. A good mech is different because it is a lot more affordable to build it out of top-of-the-line materials. A mech upgraded with salvaged materials from the first-class multipurpose mech will definitely outperform one that is upgraded with the bulk materials taken from the alien vessel."

That was not to say that the materials that their salvage teams were extracting from the hull of the Tower of Babel became worthless all of a sudden.

These materials could still be used to upgrade large batches of elite mech units or powerful mech lines.

For example, Ves already had a plan in mind to upgrade the Nullifier Battalion mechs so that they would become much better equipped to counter expert mechs and other extraordinary threats in the future!

As for the parts laying before him now, Ves was hungering to incorporate bits and pieces of them in future and existing expert mechs.

For example, the incredibly hard and tough exterior of the amputated mech limbs could be reformed in a thin, relatively light-weight but also extremely resilient physical shield for his upcoming Dullahan Project!

"How do we divide the loot?" Ves asked.

"I have already spoken with Marshal Ariadne Wodin about this subject. The Glory Seekers have no interest in claiming these parts. We can thank them for their contributions in the last battle by providing them with a greater share of phasewater."

"I can work with that." Ves spoke.

It was not as if the Larkinson Clan was short on phasewater these days. He much preferred to obtain a couple of these cutting-edge first-class mech parts so that he could power up his expert mechs as soon as possible. Too many of them have shown inadequacies as of late and urgently needed a boost!

The problem was that both Ves and Master Benedict wanted to claim all four limbs. It was quite frustrating to give up half of the limbs, knowing that they could produce incredible gear with so many high-quality materials and parts!

In fact, Ves even thought about ripping off a few armor plates so that he could upgrade his Unending Regalia. He estimated that he could multiply the damage resistance of his life-saving combat armor by at least an order of magnitude!

He glanced at the limbs with a more critical eye. There were significant differences between each individual mech limb.

The arms integrated more complicated components and also contained a number of miniaturized modules that could fulfill many useful functions.

The legs didn't contain so many gimmicks, but they were heavier, denser and more solid, which effectively meant he could convert them into a greater quantity of top-quality armor plating for his mechs and personal equipment.

"I want the legs." Ves announced. "You can have the arms."

"Hm, that is inconvenient, because I have my eye on my legs as well."

Benedict spoke as he directed an ambivalent stare at the younger mech designer. "I need as much exterior armor plating as possible to provide the Mars with additional protection. As long as I can cover its most strategic sections with the strongest armor, its chances of winning a duel against another ace mech will increase by at least 50 percent."

"That may be true, but the expert mechs of my clan need the additional protection as well. Just a little bit can protect their cockpits and ensure that my Larkinson expert pilots will be able to live long enough to reach the threshold to the rank of ace pilot."

An uncomfortable silence descended on the workshop.

"Let's settle for an arm and a leg each."

"Works for me." Ves agreed.

Though there were substantial differences between every limb, the two didn't quibble much and used a random number generator to determine who would get what limb.

In the end, Ves came away with the left arm and the right leg of the first-class multipurpose mech. That provided him with enough high-quality armor plating and more delicate components to strengthen dozens of mechs.

Once he arranged them to be moved to his own ship, Ves continued to chat with Master Benedict on various topics.

The Master brought up an important request.

"We have gone through too much as of late. Though our efforts have granted us great rewards, I do not think it is wise to continue our expedition as it is. We need to go back to safe harbor and recuperate. At the very least, we need to process and dispose our rich salvage and patch over the most pertinent vulnerabilities that have become exposed in the last battles."

Ves furrowed his brows. "When we set out from Davute, I wanted us to get back in the saddle again. It is a bit too soon to end the expedition. Still... I agree with you that we could use another pitstop."

"We have obtained a lot of material rewards, but never had the time to do anything useful with them. Consider the parts we just haggled over. How soon can you convert them all into meaningful upgrades to your products?"

"It will probably take at least three months, maybe more depending on their complexity and ease of adaptability..."

"Exactly. There are also many other bulk materials that can only be used to upgrade the performance of our starships. It is not possible to overhaul our capital ships while we are on the move. We should at least return to Davute and spend enough months to equip our most important starships with enhanced hull plating that are strong enough to directly resist the damage output of warships... at least on a single side."

This was an incredibly useful upgrade and one that Ves wanted to implement now that the idea entered his mind. It would be much more reassuring for him to resume his expedition while traveling on a ship that could resist the powerful attacks from warships such as the Tower of Babel!

Otherwise, who knew whether his expeditionary fleet would suffer the same tragic fate as the Cenatus Prospecting fleet?

One of the biggest reasons why the latter folded so quickly was because none of their starships possessed any meaningful defenses against attacks of this level!

Ves sighed. "I suppose you are right. It would be stupid to continue our expedition when we still have an enormous backlog of upgrades. We still have multiple expert pilots who are unable to do anything but sit on their thumbs while their expert mech designs aren't even close to completion. We could really use the additional help in serious battles."

The Golden Skull Alliance had only commenced the Trailblazer Expedition for a short amount of time, but already the gains exceeded his expectations!

This was why he did not feel so bad about suspending the expedition and taking a well-deserved break.

"I have another suggestion." Master Benedict spoke. "Once we are ready to resume our expedition with our upgraded ships and mechs, I suggest we adjust our risk profile for the following years."

"What do you mean by that?" Ves suspiciously asked.

"Don't go head-long into the most dangerous and exciting regions of the Red Ocean. We have fought too many high-intensity battles as of late. This not only produces excessive stress among our people, but also distorts their growth and expectations of the future. We cannot let our men live in constant fear that they will have to be ready to fight for their lives."

"What is your proposed alternative?"

"Let us explore the quieter and less risky corners of the Red Ocean. We do not necessarily have to explore areas that have already been emptied by other pioneers, but we should not stray too close to the active frontlines to minimize the chances of encountering another alien warship or fleet."

Though the rewards would doubtlessly be lower, Ves could see that this might not be bad.

"Let's think about it and discuss this at a later date with all of the other leaders. If the majority agrees, then I don't mind going on a calmer tour."

Ves had learned so much that he was more interested in designing lots of mechs.

His personal goal for this expedition was to gather as much inspiration and ideas related to mech design, and it was clear that the events of the last few months abundantly satisfied this demand!

Chapter 4638 Next Generation Opportunities

"So this is the alien battleship that you spent so much effort into defeating." Gloriana spoke as she stepped out of the shuttle.

"Woow! Everything is so big!" Andraste looked awed as her tiny, suited form bounced out of the vehicle that brought them to one of the more intact hangar bays of the half-ruined battleship. "Where are the aliens?!"

"We've collected and set aside the bodies of most of the aliens we have on the ship." Ves calmly spoke as he looked around the hangar bay himself. "It is inconvenient for our men to move around the ship while trying to avoid the occasional bodies in the way. The nunsers are all rather big and some of the other species that inhabited this vessel are even greater in size. They can pose quite the hazard."

Andraste ran up to Ves' armored form and grasped his leg as if it was a stuffed animal. Her transparent helmet did nothing to hide her big and pleading eyes.

"You will show me them, right? I want to touch them! I want to touch a real live nunser! They are so big and fluffy!"

"Don't worry, my cute little pumpkin. I will bring you to them soon enough. We will have to go much further into the ship, though. We stuffed most of them into the cells of the ship for safekeeping. After all, even if we are pretty sure that they are all braindead, we can never tell for certain that a species is able to come back due to a quirk of their alien biologies. There are also a bunch of particularly hardy aliens who have managed to survive all of the battle formation attacks."

Visiting them and examining their remarkable conditions was one of his key objectives for this tour through the intact remains of the alien battleship.

Though it was not entirely wise to tour through a completely alien vessel that had only recently been captured, Ves and the rest did not have much choice.

Master Goldstein and a large group of mechers were already on their way to the Ramage Repulsor System to take possession of the alien vessel.

Ves would have no opportunity to experience the exotic alien ambiance of this potent ship by that time!

Ves, Gloriana along with their three children proceeded to exit the hangar bay and move into a wide and broad hallway. An abundant number of honor guards surrounded them at all times in case a hidden alien defense mechanism came online.

"It's much bigger here than on our own ship." Marvaine said as he strode forward while holding his mother's hand. "Why is it so big?"

"That is because this homeship is built to accommodate the largest alien species that are expected to serve on her." Gloriana answered. "The nunsers are already large by our standards, but there are many other creatures that can easily grow bigger and heavier than them. The phase whales are a good example, but those are beasts who do not bother to work with warships to begin with. They are practically their own warships."

The little boy was completely enthralled by what he heard. "Oooh. That is so cool. Won't all of this space make the ship less powerful?"

Gloriana smiled lovingly at her son. "That is an excellent observation. To some degree, you are correct. Manned starships are made up of lots of compartments stacked together. They are like boxes that can be as large as you desire. A more expansive box is convenient because it holds more items and can accommodate more organisms, but it can also take up precious space for parts that can do useful work, such as shield generators. This alien vessel is therefore less efficient as a whole when compared to an equivalent human warship."

"So being big has its downsides." Aurelia spoke as she held Clixie in her arms.

"Miaow~!" The Rubarthan Sentinel Cat agreed while flipping her suited tail!

"It does." Ves acknowledged. "Take a look at a puelmer homeship. Their vessels are much smaller than those built by the nunsers. While there are many cultural and practical reasons why the puelmers prefer to build sub-capital oval-shaped ships, their small sizes make it much more convenient to stuff more parts in the same amount of volume. A thousand puelmers occupies as little as a third of the space of a thousand humans. Not only that, but these little aliens are also a lot smarter and more proficient at their jobs on average, so their productivity is actually higher. That is why none of their compact homeships should be underestimated."

"Can humans like us even walk inside a puelmer ship?" Andraste curiously asked.

"Mostly, no." Ves shook his head. "The puelmers generally don't design their vessels to accommodate the sizes of other alien species. This is actually a clever defense and anti-boarding measure. None of our footsoldiers can

squeeze in side their corridors and their helmets would constantly collide against the ceiling if they happen to enter a sizeable enough compartment."

The diverging sizes of the interior of a starship was therefore a good way to judge her 'alienness'. The more the compartments and passageways different from typical human proportions, the inhuman they became.

The alien battleship that they had set foot on was definitely on the weirder side!

There were plenty of alien oddities and curiosities to hold their interest. From the old layout of the hallways to the repeated molded metal artwork that displayed different aliens in strange poses, the children never had an opportunity to get bored.

The first big compartment they entered held one of the orven shield generators that had given the Golden Skull Alliance a lot of grief.

"The model shares a passing resemblance to the shield generators of the orven pirate battleship that we defeated more than a month ago." Gloriana remarked. "This one is smaller but more refined."

She sounded as if she badly wanted to pull it out of its current place and bring it back so that she could install the shield generator onto the Spirit of Bentheim!

However, she knew better than to rely on alien and indecipherable technology. It also wasn't wise to damage it as the MTA most certainly wanted to keep it intact.

Andraste curiously moved closer and pressed her suited palm against the dull metal surface. "Will we have shield generators as strong as these on our own ships?"

"In the future." Ves promised. "We can obtain a couple for our own use, but we need to become proper first-raters if we want to cover all of our starships with solid protection."

"Oh."

"I can't do it alone, my dear." He spoke. "Our clan needs to rely on you and your fellow siblings to get us there. Both your mother and father are counting on you to do well in the coming years."

"Huh?"

"Do you recall what we talked about some time ago? You need to do well in the schools that you will attend in the future. Now that we have rescued Lord Pearian Yorul-Tavik, we can expect to gain a lot of gratitude from the Yorul-Tavik Clan. That means that we can cash in a lot of favors. It will be easy to enroll you into excellent first-class virtual schools. The Yorul-Taviks might even be generous to take care of the high tuition fees and the cost of the extremely expensive school materials that you will all require."

Long-standing organizations that rely heavily on trade to make their living valued their credibility like nothing else. It was much harder for them to stay in business for multiple centuries if they had a history of reneging on their debts or screwing over their business partners!

The only way to break the game was to possess enough strength to disregard the consequences of doing so, but it was clear that no power from the relatively small and insignificant Omter Republic qualified.

As such, Minister Shederin Purnesse told Ves that the Yorul-Tavik Clan would be particularly eager to repay its debts to the Golden Skull Alliance.

Compared to all of the difficult demands that Ves could issue, asking for his kids to get an easy entry into the appropriate first-class virtual schools was a trivial matter!

Of course, the children in question would not be able to get a free ride once they got in. If they failed to keep up with their demanding studies, then not even the Yorul-Tavik Clan could prevent them from getting booted.

This was why Aurelia and Andraste still needed to complete their intensive tutoring programs before Ves could think about enrolling them into any fancy first-class virtual school.

Ves knelt in front of his children. "This is an opportunity that your father and many other friends and family risked their lives to obtain for you. I know that I am putting a heavy burden on all of your shoulders, but please study hard and do what is best for yourselves, not just our clan. Once you become a first-class professional, the upper layer of human society becomes open to you all. That is a privilege that your father and mother never got to enjoy."

"We will do our best, papa." Aurelia said as she drew closer to hug her father's armor.

"Miaow." Clixie concurred even though she had nothing to do with this matter.

"Me too!" Andraste joined in on the hug.

"Don't forget about me!" Marvaine yelled as his little legs brought him forward.

Their mother hesitated for a moment before she decided to bend down and join the group hug.

Warmth and love flowed through their bodies. No amount of protective equipment could stop them from sharing their affection with each other!

Ves pulled his body back but maintained his smile. "Great. I hope you will all succeed, but don't worry too much. If the study load becomes too much for you, it will be fine if you transfer to a more laid-back school. As your mother and I have already proven, a lower starting point is not necessarily a death

sentence. You can always climb your way up as long as you are brilliant and hard-working enough. You just need to climb a longer ladder."

He and his wife had become a lot more serious about this matter after the conclusion of the latest battle.

Not only were they thinking about giving their three current children a first-class education trajectory, they also wanted to plan ahead for their subsequent three offspring.

It would take a lot of time for the Larkinson Biotech Institute to develop its own designer baby formulas, but once this important project yielded results, Ves and Gloriana planned to complete their collection with the help of their own homegrown templates.

In no way should the quality of their younger three children be inferior to their older siblings. It would probably not be easy to meet this standard, but Ves was confident that his clan's unique specialties might give his future kids an edge over the competition.

Anyway, Ves could think about this later. He still had to complete a tour.

"Do you want to look at aliens now?" Ves asked his kids.

"Yes!"

"Let's go!"

The group left the shield generator and moved to a cell block where a large amount of prisoners had been stuffed.

They entered a cell where a dozen or so puelmers had been left on the floor like discarded trash.

The only reason why these braindead aliens were physically fine was because their round, protective suits took care of their basic needs.

"Eeeww. They're so gross." Auralia scrunched her nose in disgust. "They look so ugly in reality."

Andraste looked like she wanted to kick one of the puelmers as if he or she was an oversized football, but she was still too young and weak to make this a comfortable experience.

Ves on the other hand moved to the nearest puelmer body and fiddled with the alien's armored suit until it peeled away.

"What are you doing, Ves?" Gloriana asked in confusion.

"I am judging the grade of the puelmer skin."

"What? Wait..."

Ves grinned as he withdrew a sharp skinning knife from his toolbelt. "Don't you remember? A good piece of grade A puelmer hide can sell for as much as hundreds of MTA credits! Besides, have you ever thought about crafting your own handbags?"

Chapter 4639 Ves The Biology Teacher

"Eeeeww!"

"Eeewww eww ewww! It's so disgusting, papa!"

"I don't want to watch anymore!"

Aurelia and Marvaine initially showed curiosity at what their father was about to do, but they quickly showed a lot of revulsion once their daddy dearest started to slip the skinning knife through the skin of a random puelmer ship rating!

The two children ran to their mother as if she was the only person who could offer them refuge against the bloody and disgusting sight. The cell had literally turned into an abattoir due to the depraved actions of their father!

Naturally, Gloriana couldn't remain silent as her husband became completely unhinged.

"What are you doing, Ves?!" She demanded.

"Isn't it obvious? I am skinning a decent puelmer skin so that I can tan it into a supple and high-quality exotic leather. It probably won't be the best grade that can be attained, but it should serve as good practice for me to practice my handbag making skills."

Gloriana raised her eyebrows. "Since when did you learn how to tan leather and stitch your own handbags?!"

"Puhleeze. My incarnation is Vulcan, remember? Even if I have never cobbled together a leather handbag in my entire life, my incarnation has learned from dozens of master craftsmen. While their finer tricks and methods that require decades worth of muscle memory may still elude me, I can easily execute all of the fundamental techniques with a high degree of expertise. On top of that, Vulcan, and by extension myself, practiced the art of leatherworking within the MSTs for many hours. I know what I am doing."

"Be that as it may, have you bothered to ask whether I want your stupid handbags? The reason why the products of fashion houses such as Hoenbach and Pop Cult are so valued is not just because they are known to use high-quality materials and excellent craftsmen. It is their brand and reputation that makes the difference! Who would I be able to impress if I carry around a shabby handbag made by my husband? Socialites would think that I am being too much of a pauper by resorting to homemade goods as opposed to proper store bought products!"

Ves grew annoyed even as he continued to skin the strangely thick and rubbery puelmer leather skin from a brain dead alien body. "Hey, don't discount my work before you have even seen it! I can guarantee you that you

will change your mind once you see the finished product. It will be great once I apply my design philosophy to it. Have you ever heard of a mech designer who has bothered to make a high-quality handbag? It will absolutely be unique in the fashion industry!"

"NOT EVERYTHING NEEDS TO BE ALIVE, VES! I know you have aspirations to become a Star Designer, but this is taking it too far. A normal handbag works just as well."

Ves scowled back. "I am not going to let you drain tens of thousands of MTA credits from our bank account each time you are in the mood to buy a new handbag!"

"Those expenditures are strategic investments! Don't you know that you need to dress for success? You don't see me complaining when you waste valuable Unending alloy and other precious tech and materials to upgrade your combat armor."

"That is because my armor keeps me alive! It serves a very real functional purpose! On the other hand, those handbags of yours can't even stop a single laser beam."

"You are being disingenuous! My precious handbags are designed to help me out in the social arena, not an actual battlefield!"

As the two parents argued with each other like usual, the children slowly became accustomed to the bloody sight.

Although the ongoing skinning process still remained a disgusting process to the tender children, they couldn't help but develop a morbid curiosity towards the completely novel experience.

They had never experienced something so bloody in their lives!

Aurelia and Marvaine cautiously peeked out of the legs of their mother. The ongoing spectacle became a lot more tolerable to watch now that they were watching from a distance.

The only child that dared to move closer was Andraste. Unlike her older sister and younger brother, the middle child no longer exhibited any revulsion once she overcame her initial disgust.

Whether she gained her courage from her genetic predisposition or her active personality, Andraste became so curious that she even wanted to touch the skin!

As Ves and Gloriana got tired of arguing, the little girl tapped her father's armor.

"Papa?"

"Yes, pumpkin?"

"Why do puelmers look so weird?"

"Ah, I was just about to explain that to you all. Let me give you an early biology lesson. Since you are all living in the Red Ocean, you should know the ins and outs of each major alien race. Of all of the ones that are prominent today, the puelmers rank at the top due to one significant reason. Do you know what makes them so feared and notorious?"

"The puelmers are the most technologically advanced alien race in the Red Ocean." Aurelia neatly answered, which earned her a loving pat on her helmet from her mother.

"That's right." Ves nodded as he was just about to detach the last pieces of skin from the bloody meatball. "However, have you ever wondered why these small, funny-looking aliens are so darned smart? What makes them more

capable of learning lots of complicated knowledge and developing such a high mastery of technology?"

"Uhhh."

That was a topic that obviously went beyond the scope of what they learned up to this point.

"The answer lies in evolution." Ves revealed. "Now what is evolution, you say? You can think of it as the growth process of an entire species. Instead of people like you and me undergoing successive transformations as we grow smarter and more powerful, there are races that continue to make small changes with every generation of offspring that they produce. Now what determines the direction of the evolution of a species?"

"Oh, I know this!" Aurelia's eyes lit up. "It's survival!"

"That is essentially true, but it is not the complete answer. What else plays a role?"

"Competition." Andraste replied with a gleaming expression. "The stronger aliens get to be alive because they beat the weaker ones."

"That is also true, but the answer is still not complete. What are you still missing?"

Seeing that his children had run out of ideas, Ves supplied them with the words that he wanted to hear.

"It is an adaptation. Well, I would have been satisfied if you mentioned the word environment instead. The point is that ball-shaped aliens with lots of creepy little arms poking out of their bodies like this one doesn't appear for no reason. Unless the puelmer race is an artificial creation that a bored phase whale brought to life in order to prank nature, it is environmental pressures that has caused them to evolve in this manner."

Once Ves completed the skinning process, he lifted up the bloody skin and looked at it with an appraising eye.

"Hm, the crew members of this alien ship are more elite and well-groomed than normal. There aren't as many scars or signs of wear and tear as I expected. This hide should be able to produce grade B puelmer leather once it is tanned."

Grade B was far more common and abundant than grade A. The small visual imperfections made it unsuitable to be used by the top fashion houses. Only lesser brands and other types of companies were willing to use these lesser hides.

"You were giving our children a biology lesson, Ves." Gloriana reminded her absent-minded husband.

"Oh, you're right. Where was I? Well, let me tell you about the puelmer home planet where they originally evolved from. Its name is not important. What is more interesting is that it is a harsh and unfriendly globe that is largely barren and windswept. It features heavier gravity than our standard norm and also has a harsh sun in the sky. If ancient humans were dropped onto the planet, they wouldn't be able to survive longer than a day. However, these smaller and weaker-looking aliens are able to thrive on the same planet. Do you know why?"

Marvaine cautiously raised his hand. "Is it because they don't need to eat as much food because their bodies are so small?"

"Good answer!" Ves grinned back at his son. He approached another brain dead alien body and more skillfully removed the space suit. "Look at this body shape. I know it looks ugly and abhorrent in our eyes, but evolution doesn't care about that. It is okay as long as it works. Now, think about what made

these aliens evolve into balls instead of a more common body shape. What is the overarching advantage of having this body?"

"You can roll forward without much effort." Marvaine insightfully answered. "I already noticed when I made my Mekanos. It takes a lot of leg strength to make heavy mechs move. It's much easier to do so if the mechs have wheels."

"That is another excellent answer! You are thinking in the right direction, Marvaine. Evolution is a process that is similar to designing mechs. Nature or whatever else constantly tinkers with the designs of different species. Whatever works will be kept while everything else that has earned a failing grade will go extinct. In this case, the harsh, arid, dusty and food-scarce environment of the puelmer home planet demanded a species that can move great distances to scavenge for food. It has to do so while moving under hefty gravity as well. At the same time, a lot of the terrain is rather flat and gentle. This made it so that legs aren't really needed to move around. All of these factors and more have led to the evolution of the puelmer race."

Different planets produced different forms of life. Nature could be quite creative sometimes and produce life forms that completely defied everything that human biologists had theorized.

"If these puelmers originally started off as hungry scavengers, how come they have become so strong now?" Aurelia critically asked.

"Ah, that is another important question. Let me show you." Ves said as he thumped the second body of a brain dead puelmer.

Without any further ado, he stabbed his skinning knife into the flesh of the alien and cut into its flesh!

"Eeewww!"

"Ewww eww!"

Blood spilled out in copious amounts as Ves essentially hacked the outer layers of flesh and other disgusting biomatter!

Ves only stopped once he exposed the brain of the puelmer.

"This is the brain and by far the most important organ of a puelmer. Due to their unusual method of locomotion, puelmer brains not only get spun around a lot, but they are also subjected to more knocks and concussions. Over many generations, the hardier puelmers have developed flexible, more resistant and more naturally regenerating brains. That has many implications, but the most important one is that their ability to absorb new knowledge and accept new paradigms is actually really impressive."

He then used his skinning knife to lift a relatively long but thin alien arm.

"Aside from that, there is a second major reason why puelmers are so damn smart. Look at this noodly limb. Do you think that the puelmers can beat any creature with arms like these?"

"Even I can win an arm wrestle match against a puelmer!" Marvaine quipped.

Ves chuckled. "You may very well be right. Puelmers never developed any strong or thick arms because it requires too much energy to grow and fuel. The aliens were never meant to support their own bodies with their limbs. Their round shapes allow them to roll wherever they want as long as the elevation isn't too steep. The arms that poke out of the body are only there to push the body in the right direction and make sure that it keeps rolling. While that works out well enough if the puelmers want to move, these arms are really awful in everything else. These silly-looking aliens can't hunt their own prey nor wage war against each other. Yet they still have the desire to do both. How can they overcome their inherent defects?"

"That's easy." Andraste said. "They build really powerful weapons!"

"That's correct. Just like humans, the puelmers have come to rely on technology to enhance their combat power. The difference between us and the puelmers is that we can at least punch, kick and wrestle our enemies if we have to. The puelmers can't even do that. This has caused them to develop a much greater dependence and appreciation of technology. You cannot imagine how much the puelmers worship and cling to technology. This is how they have emerged to become the most advanced technological race in the Red Ocean. The phase whales may have them beat in terms of biotechnology and phasewater applications, but the puelmers excel in almost everything else!"

The three children became completely impressed by the puelmer race. They no longer took the ball-shaped aliens as lightly as before.

"Remember, kids. Every form of life can be dangerous. Even smaller ones such as puelmers may one day exceed humans if we aren't careful enough!"

Chapter 4640 Faulty Logic

By the time that Ves completed his short but visually visceral biology lesson, his children all learned far more about the puelmer race than they ever asked for! Their excellent memories became a burden rather than a boon under these circumstances.

No matter how hard they tried to scrub the memories of dismembered, flayed and butcher puelmer bodies out of their tender little minds, they could not wash them away!

As Ves set aside multiple puelmer hides that he had just skinned, his wife remained disgusted throughout the entire ordeal.

Even so, she hadn't done much to stop her husband from traumatizing their three lovely kids.

That was surprising because Ves expected more opposition from her. What he was doing did not exactly fit in the highly refined and sophisticated lesson plans she had drafted for her offspring!

"As much as I want our daughters and sons to grow up in a comfortable and luxurious environment, I would be doing a disservice to them if I shelter them too much." Gloriana quietly said to Ves as she crossed her arms. "Now that we are about to enroll them all into first-class virtual schools, they need an edge in order to compete against their future classmates. In a dangerous and turbulent environment like the Red Ocean, all of our children will need to be stronger, more ruthless and more desensitized towards violence. While I do not want to raise them into savages, I am realistic enough to know that it is better to prepare them for future challenges ahead of time."

Ves nodded. That was exactly one of the reasons why he butchered several puelmer bodies in front of his children.

Ordinarily, he would never expose the three of them to such a horrible spectacle, but they weren't ordinary children to begin with. Their cognitive development significantly surpassed that of their peers, and even little Marvaine had become too clever for their own good.

This was normally good news, but their overdevelopment had already caused them to notice how much better they were than every other kid their age.

Aurelia and Andraste already exhibited arrogant and stuck-up tendencies, and that triggered lots of alarms in their father's mind!

He needed to shake them out of their comfort zone and teach them that there were still better people and aliens beyond the bubble of the Larkinson Clan.

Once they were finally ready to attend their respective first-class virtual schools and interact with peers from all kinds of amazing backgrounds, they only had a single chance to start off at the right foot.

Ves would rather have his children maintain a humble and respective demeanor than an arrogant and dismissive attitude!

His wife wasn't stupid. She recognized the necessity of adjusting their children as well. She just didn't have it in her to resort to shock treatment.

"Come now, my little babies. You probably have enough of looking at ugly puelmers. Why don't we go and move over to the adjacent cell? There are plenty of fluffy nunsers piled up over there! I promise that they are a lot more fun to explore!"

The family moved over to the aforementioned cell. The moods of the children quickly recovered now that there were no more puelmers in sight.

"Wow... so big."

"They're so heavy."

"Look! Look! Is this really fur?"

Though the nunsers possessed a strong and ferocious reputation in the Red Ocean, they looked a lot more 'PR-friendly' compared to the puelmers.

This was because if someone squinted really hard, they could mistake nunsers for cows that just happened to be dyed in blue or green.

In fact, this resemblance sparked the first question asked by the children.

"Why do they look like cows, papa?" Marvin asked.

"That is due to a phenomenon known as convergent evolution." Ves replied in his biology teacher guide. "In short, when two different species are subjected to similar environmental pressures, they tend to evolve in the same direction. The reason for that should be clear. Nature often follows the path of least resistance. The more efficient and lower cost solutions are more likely to be chosen by nature."

All three of his children stared at their father with blank expressions.

"Nunsers are basically colorful space cows. Are you happy now?!"

None of his children were in the mood to listen to another elaborate biology lesson. They would much rather approach the cute space cows and poke at their bodies.

Due to their oddly colored fur, the nunsers unintentionally looked like giant toys. That made them remarkably more attractive to children so long as the brain dead aliens did not exhibit their original behavior.

Ves peeled off the space suit from a low-ranking nunsers. This allowed his children to poke, prod and pull at the dull green fur as many times as they wished.

Andraste playfully tugged at a floppy ear. "Can we put these nunsers into farms and milk them like real cows? What would it be like if we ate nunsers steak?"

"Nunsers are sentient alien beings!" Gloriana responded in a heated tone.

"They are not cows! There is a difference between the two. We are humans. We are a civilized race. One of the common norms that both humans and many aliens collectively abide by is to never treat another sentient alien race as cattle. Not all alien races are willing to abide by this common rule, but the rest have good reasons to abide by the restrictions. Other species such as nunsers and puelmers are our competitors. Even if we are able to overpower them, we should still respect their intelligence, their accomplishments and their history. There is no reason to inflict needless suffering on them. This will only corrupt our civilization and turn humans into degenerates."

Aurelia looked confused. "If it is not okay to eat them, why is it acceptable to turn their skins into handbags? Isn't that the same?"

"You're wrong! That is completely different!"

It took a while for Gloriana to convince her children that it was completely acceptable to skin intelligent alien beings, while still insisting that partaking in their flesh was wrong.

Ves found that to be a difficult but not an impossible stance to defend.

"What determines whether it is okay or not is how useful it is for us. Puelmer leather is useful because it offers a type of natural and authentic leather that possesses a desirable combination of properties. Compared to the alternatives, puelmer leather is flexible, bouncy, soft, resistant to scratches and so on. There is no natural substitute of this leather type. As for eating puelmer meat, it is largely pointless. Humanity has already domesticated so many terrestrial and alien creatures that we have already developed countless sources of natural meat products."

Aurelia narrowed her eyes. "That is faulty logic, papa. You could apply the same argument towards eating puelmer meat to using puelmer leather. Both activities are non-essential to the survival and betterment of the human race."

Ves threw up his arms! "I give up!"

Regardless, the children all had their fun. Once they familiarized themselves with the physiology of the nunsers race, Ves brought them to a few more cells which held the bodies of other alien species.

Some of these aliens were new to Ves as well. He felt just as curious and excited as his children as he examined the variety of aliens that served aboard the alien battleship.

Once they were done with looking at different alien bodies, the little family continued to tour a few other compartments.

They explored a damaged command center, an inoperable warp drive and a nature-filled compartment that was heavily frequented by nunsers.

Each of them expanded their horizons as they became exposed and enchanted by alien architecture, alien artwork, alien design principles and alien ideologies.

Hardly any humans received the opportunity to tour an actual alien battleship. This was a rare opportunity for each of them. The experience was rewarding to all of them as they came away with lots of different gains, even if much of them were not very tangible.

Ves and Gloriana eventually accompanied their tired but satisfied children back to the Spirit of Bentheim.

After enjoying a hearty dinner before putting their kids to bed, the two mech designers sat together in the living area like usual.

"Miaow~" Clixie purred as Blinky had come out of Ves' head to give the other cat a bath.

The Rubarthan Sentinel Cat missed Lucky, but the gem cat was still preoccupied with phasing through the alien battleship to ingest the most palatable first-class exotics.

Lucky had so much choice on the alien battleship that he needed to be picky in order to gain the most out of this trip!

Ves looked forward to what sort of gem his first cat would produce next. The quality of the materials that Lucky was able to partake in this time was so much better that he had to produce another batch of powerful gems in the near future!

"What are you thinking about this time, Ves?" Gloriana asked.

"Oh, uhm, I was thinking on how I should handle my upcoming meeting with Master Goldstein and the MTA. There is no doubt that the mechers are going to claim the remnants of the alien battleship."

Gloriana understood his frustrations. "Don't think too much about what you are losing. It is already an inevitability for us to lose possession of the alien vessel. What you should be thinking about instead is what we are able to obtain in return. The mechers will try to get away with offering less remuneration that the vessel is strictly worth, but even if they discount the value of the Tower of Babel by 75 percent, that still represents an enormous absolute value."

"You.... you're right." Ves perked up a bit. "It is absolutely exceptional for a small group of second-class pioneers to challenge and defeat a first-class alien battleship. The value of all of the first-class exotics and phasewater put into her construction is so high that you can build a couple of armed cruisers or dozens of first-class mech regiments out of the materials alone!"

The Golden Skull Alliance would be missing out on an incredible amount of resources that were worth more than the entire expeditionary fleet put together!

The MTA may have the strength to appropriate all of these valuables for themselves, but if they did not pay acceptable compensation in return, then no pioneer would be willing to work earnestly for the mechers anymore!

Ves already started to salivate at the thought of the ludicrous amount of MTA merits the Mech Trade Association would be willing to fork over.

"It won't take long before the MTA arrives in the star system." He said as he checked the time.

"Mmhmm. Go to sleep. You will need to be at your peak by the time you meet with Master Goldstein. Do not fixate too much on MTA merits. The contributions that we have made this time are so great that we deserve greater access to what is truly taking place above our heads."

Ves shrugged. "It may be helpful to know a little more about the ongoing struggles at the upper layers of our society, but we are still too small to participate in those dangerous games. I would rather keep our heads down and continue to develop quietly. I am more interested in converting all of our tangible and intangible gains into strength. With all of the battles and operations I have been preoccupied with lately, I have spent less time on my actual work than I wish. Right now, I just want to set aside every distraction and devote several uninterrupted months to my design projects so that I can finally complete them in a timely manner."

"That is a good idea. I know how important the Dullahan Project is to you. I am eager to complete my own research and design projects as well without spending needless time worrying about your latest antics."