

Inside the house on Emberflit Alley, a procedure was being prepared.

In drastic contrast to the rest of Zaun, the room was completely clean. Not a single speck of dust or spot of grime could be found - exactly the way Viktor liked it. He knew the value of order and cleanliness, and his laboratory reflected that. Glass jars, polished to a mirror sheen, contained organs floating in green fluid, some organic, others synthetic, most a mixture of the two. Automatons stood sentinel against the walls, frozen in place. The large leather gurney in the center of the room was clean, the scientist replacing and cleaning it after every operation.

Even the orphan now bound to the gurney was clean, years of grime carefully cleaned off in a bath - the first one he had ever taken. Viktor himself had ceased to take baths the further along his experiments had proceeded, opting instead to clean himself with sponge and water. The irony of cleaning himself as so many a scientist cleaned their prized automata was not lost on him.

“Doctor?” The voice of the child pulled Viktor away from both his routine of cleaning his surgical tools and his thoughts. He was not in fact a doctor, but to correct the child would do more harm than good at this point. The child needed to be as calm as possible for the procedure to follow. He was well aware that he was not the most comforting figure to look upon, but the scientist did the best he could.

“Yes?” replied Viktor, hands finally finishing arranging his tools, third arm stretching to nudge an errant scalpel back into place.

“Will this hurt?”

It was a terribly naive question, but not one that Viktor begrudged. The patient was a child, after all, and such things were to be expected.

“No, child,” he answered after a pause. “It will not. You will be unconscious during the event. Should all go well, you will awaken with lungs free from the illness. In fact, should all go well, you will never have to worry about such illnesses again.”

“That sounds nice,” the child mumbled.

“Yes,” agreed Viktor. “It does.”

“Then why do people not like you?”

“Because,” the machine herald spoke softly, his natural voice distorted through the machinery placed in his throat and lungs, “they fear what they do not understand.” Slowly, he moved to the side table, and picked up a mask, with attached tank, the two connected by a length of clear piping with a valve. “They remain content with what they have, instead of striving for more, as I

do. They are scared of me because I am the next step in evolution, and a primal part of them understands that they will soon become obsolete.”

“I don't think I understand,” the child whispered.

Viktor smiled as best he could beneath the metal mask. “That is fine. You are yet a child. One day you will. And you will return.”

There was a brief pause as he checked the connection between the mask and tank.

“Are you ready, child?”

“Yes,” the orphan whispered.

Viktor pressed the mask against his patient's face, creating a seal, and twisted the valve, letting the gas flow. “Breathe deep,” he advised the patient as gently as he could. “The more you take in, the longer you will stay unconscious.”

The patient followed his advice, and soon lay asleep on the gurney. Viktor shut the valve with his third arm, which lowered the device to the floor, as his other two arms remained busy with the surgical tools, selecting the one needed for the current moment. A deep breath was drawn, and the machine herald began.

The first half of the surgery - the opening of the chest - went flawlessly, the flesh of the patient drawn aside to reveal the organs within. The glistening viscera, the clenching heart, and the blackened, diseased lungs. The cold light gleamed off the machinery Viktor had prepared to replace the lungs, machinery that was now being warmed up, so that operation would immediately begin upon replacement.

With deft hands, the right and left bronchus were swiftly cut immediately before they entered the lung proper, removing both lungs entirely. He moved quickly now, knowing that the human brain could not last long without oxygen. The left one was fitted first, the machinery fitting perfectly into the chest cavity, the stump of the bronchus a little bigger than the valve he had prepared. This was no problem, the valve simply slipped inside the bronchus like two sections of pipe, and was cauterized and sealed with the pinpoint laser of his third arm. The same procedure was repeated for the right lung, and Viktor began to seal up the incision made.

The laser finished cauterizing the wound, and Viktor allowed himself to relax once more. The surgery was over, and now all he had to do was wait for the child to wake up.

He never did. The child never woke up, passing away six hours after Viktor completed the operation. The scientist stared at the corpse on the gurney for a long time. Finally, he rose, and

rung a bell on his workbench. Within a minute, acolytes of his were at the door of his laboratory. At his workbench, Viktor gestured over his shoulder with the third arm.

“Take it out back, bury it with the others. Make sure to remove the machinery before you do so.”

The two nodded, and stepped to the blood-stained gurney, wheeling it out of the room. They no longer registered in the scientist’s mind, however. A piece of paper was retrieved from the workbench, as was a inkwell and pen, Viktor’s third arm turning on a lamp. They were placed on the table, and Viktor immediately began to sketch a new design, the child forgotten.

A light shone in the window on Emberflit Alley, and while the City of Progress slept, the Glorious Evolution marched on.