

## Mech 4011

### Chapter 4011 Blooming Lotus

After an hour of sculpting and shaping the spiritual firearm, Ves and Blinky finally put their finishing touches to the Death Lotus, breathing more life into it so that the remarkable construct completely came together!

Helena looked fascinated as Ves demonstrated the power of creation before her eyes. Though he made it look easy, her nature as a spiritual entity and one that was sensitive to both life and death allowed her to observe many mysterious phenomena!

"Our mothers were right. Ves is truly a talent when it comes to breaking rules!"

Though life and creation wasn't a part of her domain, Helena nonetheless derived several profound insights from seeing Ves at work. While it would take a lot of time for her to process her gains and convert them into real enhancements, she already saw new ways to develop and apply her death domain!

She already affirmed her decision to pay more attention to Ves. If she can harvest a few insights whenever he employed his power of creation, she would definitely be able to take off and catch up to her mothers!

Meanwhile, Ves finally relaxed when he verified that his attempt to create a living spiritual firearm had succeeded!

"Great work, Blinky. Can you check it one more time to see whether it is in the right state?"

Mrow!

Blinky dove forward and circled the floating pistol. The cat did not detect any traces that needed to be corrected. The Death Lotus largely conformed to its original design!

Mrow mrow.

"That's great. You can get back now. I'll take it from here." Ves said as he carefully picked up his new weapon.

He did not underestimate its danger and made sure to follow the basic safety rules while handling his new gun.

While he was pretty confident in his own spiritual defenses, he did not want to see what would happen if he actually pulled the trigger while he was looking straight down the muzzle!

For a moment, he admired his own handiwork. Though the Death Lotus had not become a masterwork, he was impressed by the quality and refinement of his first true spiritual firearm.

The spiritual parts all looked proper and the surface appearance of the gun looked even more charming than he envisioned. It appeared that when the Death Lotus gained life, it was already predisposed towards strengthening its beauty.

Perhaps the Death Lotus was already smart enough to know that its future was related to how much Helena appreciated her new weapon!

Certainly, the Death Lotus already succeeded in its objective. Helena looked starry-eyed at the new gun. What it lacked in ferocity, it made up for it with elegance. Its tasteful flower motif added a clear feminine touch to the gun without making it look as if it was a toy.

Ves mentally turned a switch that caused the Death Lotus to transform from its Pistol Mode to its Flower Mode.

"Ah!" Helena gasped with delight. "It looks even prettier in this form! I love the glow effect!"

The lotus flower turned black, but the subtle gray corona surrounding its shape made sure that it would not go ignored!

As Ves studied the Death Lotus in its dormant form, he could feel that he was holding the equivalent of a bomb made out of death energy. Holding it was no different from holding a plasma grenade!

The only person who could hold it safely was Helena, who was its sole intended user. Others who managed to get their hands on the Death Lotus for whatever reason would quickly be met with a nasty surprise if they tried anything!

Of course, the Death Lotus was still knowledgeable enough to recognize that certain close family members such as himself and his mothers should be exempt from its theft countermeasures.

"Can I... can I hold it, brother?" Helena hungrily asked.

"Hold on for a moment. This is not a toy. I don't want you to go off shooting this weapon in a random direction. The chances are high that the death beam that you'll be able to discharge will kill a lot of innocent Larkinsons in its path!"

Ves did not want to take any risks with this potent new weapon! Given Helena's excitement and relative youth, he felt it was irresponsible to hand over his present right away.

He decided to take a short trip into space. He did not want to remain close to his fleet while he tested a weapon that should theoretically be powerful enough to kill a dark god!

He instructed his staff to prepare his shuttle for departure. He also called for a squad of Battle Criers as well as Venerable Joshua and the Everchanger to accompany him out into space.

"Hmm, maybe I should take Jannzi as well."

Ves briefly considered this option before he decided it was better not to do anything too extravagant in the Davute System.

Ves carried the Death Lotus to the hangar bay and hopped inside his shuttle without giving Helena a chance to play with the weapon.

Naturally, the Daughter of Death was quite peeved about that. She resentfully stared at her overcautious brother while hugging Lucky against her chest.

"Hmph! Who do you think I am? I'm not a baby, you know! I know how to handle weapons responsibly!"

Ves threw a skeptical glance in her direction. "You are technically only a day old, you know. Even my daughter Aurelia is older than you! Let alone a gun, you shouldn't be allowed to handle a knife."

"I'm a god, not a mortal! We are born differently!"

"Whatever you say, baby."

"Idiot brother." Helena grumbled.

"Meow!" Lucky concurred as he did not hesitate to take the gray lady's side.

The armored shuttle flew out of the Spirit of Bentheim and slowly headed towards the perimeter of the expeditionary fleet's patrol range.

The orbit of Davute VII was quite busy. Thousands of ships had settled into different orbits while thousands more traveled back and forth in order to fuel the planet's booming economy.

Fortunately, space was incredibly vast, so there weren't any fleets or ships that were uncomfortably close to the expeditionary fleet.

After reaching a distance that was far enough from the main fleet, Ves ordered the shuttle to make a relative stop. He then instructed the crew to deploy several

specialized jamming beacons that the clan had acquired during a previous procurement round.

The jamming beacons were all quality products that could form a fairly powerful localized jamming field that was enough to scramble and block nearly all forms of observations.

However, Ves wasn't satisfied with employing just a single measure.

"Deploy the blocking screens."

The Bright Warriors piloted by the Battle Criers all brought out large sheets of flexible material and folded it out to envelop the shuttle in a giant metallic 'tent'.

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After he became satisfied with these precautions, he was finally ready to test out the Death Lotus.

"Hey, are you going to fire my new gun? Why don't you let me pull the trigger first! Give me my new flower!"

Ves held off his whining sister. "Be patient. As a craftsman, I have an obligation to make sure that my creations are safe and responsible."

He was truly afraid that his sister would accidentally fire a blast at full power at the surface of the planet or a starship that was unlucky enough to be in the way!

In order to make sure that accidents like that wouldn't take place, he accessed his comm and visited a database that registered all of the known coordinates of ships and mechs in the star system.

A lot of different dots appeared on the map. Many of them were concentrated around planets such as Davute VII, but there were also a lot of other ships that were positioned elsewhere on a horizontal plane.

There were remarkably few ships who flew 'above' or 'below' this plane. There were hardly any reasons for them to do so as all the planets and asteroids of value were located on the horizontal plane.

However, there were still enough ships and other installations in odd places that Ves had to make sure to determine an angle that minimized the chances of hitting anything that did not deserve to get struck.

"Over there."

He commanded the shuttle to rotate along its axis so that Ves was able to extend the Death Lotus in the right direction if he aimed it straight outside the hatch.

Ves briefly checked its energy reservoir. "It should have enough left over after its creation."

He switched off the spiritual firearm's safeties but did not wait too long for it to charge itself up. After verifying the direction of his shot one last time, he carefully pulled the trigger.

A small and thin gray beam shot out from the elegant-looking weapon. The energy beam looked distinctly unimpressive and underwhelming, but Ves almost felt a palpating strong threat from this isolated discharge!

He estimated that while Blinky should be able to stop it, his companion spirit would certainly suffer a bad stomach ache in the process!

If the Death Lotus struck him a second time, then Blinky wouldn't have any spare capacity left to negate the concentrated attack!

Soon enough, he smiled. "This is almost exactly what I wanted to achieve!"

A flashy and powerful beam attack might look cool in all of the action dramas, but they were horribly wasteful and inefficient.

What Ves sought was to turn his Death Lotus into a weapon that could slay the dark gods by overcoming their formidable energy-based defenses. Other than draining the shields through exhausting it, the only other way to do so was by launching an attack that was so powerful and concentrated that it could punch through any barrier!

Another useful feature about the Death Lotus was that its output possessed a terrifying range!

Many ordinary spiritual attacks dispersed rather quickly because they weren't coherent enough.

It was different for a specialized tool like his new spiritual firearm! While its beam wasn't entirely straight, it was close enough for it to be able to hit targets that were hundreds of thousands or even millions of kilometers away!

As long as Helena's aim was precise enough, it was definitely possible for her to snipe distant targets far beyond the range where she risked retaliation!

"This attack... is completely different from the one I used to win my first battle!" Helena uttered in fascination.

"Meow!"

Even Lucky looked spooked at the power of this new spiritual firearm!

As Ves parsed the data of his first test shot, he adjusted the settings of the Death Lotus and pulled the trigger again.

This time, the beam was a lot weaker than the previous one. He had put it at the lowest setting possible, but the lethality was still too big! Any ordinary person who stood in its way would definitely get killed no matter how much armor and energy shielding was in the way!

Ves suddenly realized that he had just invented a near-perfect assassination weapon!

He handed it over to Helena before he became engulfed by new ideas.

"Here. You should try it now."

She looked surprised. "You're finally willing to let me use my new present?"

"Yes, but make sure you only fire in the same direction as I did. I don't want you to get me into trouble!"

"Hey, just because I am the incarnation of death doesn't mean I am eager to reap people's souls. The Valkyrie mechs under my supervision already do plenty of that in my name."

In order for Helena to grow and evolve, it wasn't enough for her to collect the spiritual feedback of mech pilots.

She needed to develop her death domain in a qualitative fashion, and to do that she needed to harvest the energy of the death, among other requirements!

Ves did not feel bothered by that at all. So what if his sister was a spiritual parasite who relied on the slaughter of many lives in order to grow stronger? His family was more important than all of the poor schmucks who were unlucky enough to die in front of his Valkyrie mechs!

After Ves briefly instructed her how to utilize the Death Lotus, Helena couldn't hold herself back any longer.

She aimed the weapon at a safe direction but did not pull the trigger immediately.

"Wait, what are you doing? Are you charging your gun? Slow down! You're putting in too much energy!"

Ves grew alarmed as the Death Lotus eagerly sucked in a copious amount of free death energy!

The concentration of death energy became so high that the pistol was radiating a huge amount of threat towards all life!

"Give me back the gun! Don't pull the trigger! It's too dangerous!"

It was too late!

After Helena put in enough energy into the Death Lotus to pose a serious threat against a dark god, she gleefully pulled the trigger!

A larger and brighter beam of concentrated death energy shot out of the gun and soared far away into the distance!

Ves didn't know how far the powerful death beam traveled, but he guessed it was not short!

"Fortunately, there wasn't anything in the way." He sighed in relief.

## Chapter 4012 Humans Are Scary

In a distant location, an alien stealth vessel had just encountered tragedy!

The modestly-sized observation vessel that had been assigned to keep watch on one of the more vulnerable and less well-defended human settlements.

The secret puelmer spy vessel quietly hovered in the Davute System for many months without issue. The puelmer race had already grown familiar with the division of human organizations and knew that it only really had to watch out for the 'Big Two' and the 'first-rate superstates'.

As for other human forces? They all belonged to the underclass of human society! It was not without reason why they were called space peasants. They didn't even receive the right to operate their own warships!

Since these space peasants posed so little threat to puelmer starships, it should be trivially easy to keep an eye on what went on in their key star systems!

That was what the crew of the puelmer stealth vessel thought. They quietly recorded the traffic and the flow of goods flowing in and out of Davute's main economic hub without encountering any sign of getting exposed until their ship suddenly suffered a calamity!

A powerful energy beam had shot through the hull of the stealth vessel without warning!

Though the strange beam did not disrupt her active stealth systems nor interrupt any of her functioning, its effect on the lives aboard the vessel was much more devastating!

Before the fateful strike, the ball-like aliens were working quietly behind their workstations.

Half of them suddenly experienced palpitations as if a massive threat to their lives was about to strike!

They barely had time to roll away before a gray blast of energy shot straight through their positions, reaping their lives and wiping out any measure of vitality in their small and compact bodies!

By the time the other half of the crew realized what had happened, they screamed while rolling around their bodies in panic!

Eventually, the puelmer survivors got a hold of themselves and quickly decided to evacuate from the star system now that they realized their vessel was exposed.

If the unknown human adversary could strike their hidden vessel once, the enemy could do so again!

"We must warn our brethren of this new threat!" The puelmer second-in-command exclaimed in his squeaky alien language as he spoke to his fellow survivors. "Send an emergency transmission back to headquarters! Inform our superiors that the 'space peasants' in this star system have made an astonishing technological breakthrough! Not only have the humans developed another means to detect our stealth vessels from a distance we thought was safe, but they have also invented a powerful new directed energy weapon that can pass through both energy and physical barriers and take our lives directly!"

As the surviving puelmers continued to reassess the threat posed by the lesser elements of humanity, they desperately moved their vessel away as far away from the inner system as possible.

If not for the fact that entering into warp travel would produce spatial fluctuations that could easily be detected by the many sensors in the star system, the puelmers would have activated the stealth vessel's warp drive in an instant!

While the hidden aliens were scrambling, the source of their distress grew more pleased with her present.

"This is the best birthday present ever! I already love it to death!" Helena happily cheered as she rubbed her cheek against the surface of her new pistol.



Though she initially believed that she was powerful enough to defeat her opponents by relying on her own strength and abilities, the Death Lotus provided her with too much convenience for her to ignore!

Not only did it allow her to project her deathly energy in a much more concentrated attack, the range of the Death Lotus was the real killer!

Her eyes glinted as she thought of the alien lives she reaped. She wanted to do her brother a favor and clean up those funny aliens who were snooping in his direction from afar.

The Death Lotus did not disappoint! Though its beam eventually weakened and dispersed over a long distance, her new weapon still managed to hit her intended target!

It didn't matter too much if the new spiritual firearm did not come in the form of a long rifle. Spiritual constructs operated in a different environment and abided by different rules.

The Death Lotus was also alive, which meant it was able to correct its own flaws and perform more effectively to a degree.

All of this and more convinced Helena that her brother's present was not only awesome, but would only become even more powerful in the future, especially when it remained in her hands!

Once she was satisfied with the serious output of her new gun, she switched the Death Lotus from its dangerous Pistol Mode to its more pretty and innocuous-looking Flower Form.

She put the glowing black lotus flower in her hair and conjured up a mirror out of her own energy.

"I'm so cute!"

"Yes you are." Ves hollowly said as he prayed that the last attack did not provoke any trouble for his clan. "I would appreciate it if you don't fire your weapon willy-nilly again. You can shoot wherever you want in the Nyxian Gap, but please show a bit more restraint in a civilized location!"

Helena rolled her eyes. "I'm the Daughter of Death, brother. I end lives wherever I go. It comes with the job."

"Gods are artificial concepts that do not exist in nature!" Ves insisted! "You're just a powerful life form who happens to be untouchable by ordinary people. You shouldn't grow a big head all of a sudden and assume you can reign over puny mortal humans

like myself as if you can treat us all like toys. I think that even you will be forced to retreat if you are ever confronted by the strongest CFA battleships or the most formidable MTA god mechs. Oh, and don't assume that the Compact is a pushover either based on the agents they have sent to the Nyxian Gap so far. Even if the cultists are only a shadow of their former selves, they are still far more numerous and knowledgeable than you can imagine!"

From the way Helena rolled her eyes, it appeared that his warning fell on deaf ears. She completely embraced her guise as an all-powerful death goddess who could kill any opposing life that got in her way!

Ves feared that her initial victory against the dark gods had given her a distorted impression of all of the threats in the cosmos.

Fortunately, his gift should help her tide over her initial period as a newborn spiritual entity. Though she might develop a dangerous dependency on the Death Lotus, this was a better outcome to Ves than losing his only sister!

As Ves ordered his crew to take down the blocking screens and bring his shuttle back to the Spirit of Benheim, his sister was just about to retract her presence.

"I would love to spend more time with you, brother, but my mothers have sustained serious injuries after the last battle, so I will need to cover for their responsibilities."

Ves furrowed his brows. "I thought entities like yourself can manifest in multiple places at a time."

"It's not that simple, brother." Helena shook her head. "I am 'mainly' residing in the Yeina Star Cluster as that is where most of my anchors and my worshipers are residing. The enormous quantity of Hexer worshipers and Valkyrie mechs is making it a lot easier for me to do stuff over there. As for the Red Ocean, aside from the decent amount of Valkyrie mechs fielded by the Hexer colonists, there is only a fraction of that in your fleet."

"You mean that thousands of Valkyrie mechs and tens of thousands of devoted worshippers in the expeditionary fleet aren't enough for you already?"

Helena chuckled and stretched her arm to tousle his hair. "Deities work on a grander scale than that, silly brother. You can't be a decent god in any galaxy these days without having at least a million worshipers. That is also why that Ylvaine fellow is doing so poorly these days. You should do something about his lack of worship. As much as I am reluctant to admit it, gods in the current environment need the support of mortals to sustain their existence. Without anyone knowing about us, we will slowly lose our ability to affect the material realm while fading from existence. This is worse than death. This is true erasure from reality. I don't want to suffer this fate so soon when I have just become alive."

"Don't worry, sis. I might not fully understand what you're going through, but I will make sure that you receive the support you need to sustain your existence." Ves seriously pledged. "It will take a bit of time, but I will eventually release new mechs centered around you that will introduce you to millions if not billions of mech pilots in the Red Ocean. As long as I succeed, your growth will catch up to your mothers and you will also be able to manifest yourself more easily in this dwarf galaxy."

His answer pleased his sister. She leaned in and planted a quick kiss on his cheek. "I have the best brother I could ask for! I really enjoyed my first time with you, Ves, but I truly need to go and smash more Abyssals."

"Hey, aren't you forgetting about a certain promise?!"

"Oh. Yes. I just remembered I promised to give you a gift in return. Our mothers did say that sharing is caring."

Helena's manifestation went still as she brought out a formidable amount of energy and channeled it somewhere.

"There! That should give you more material to play with!" Helena smiled. "I will try and give you a more thoughtful present when I have developed my divine powers further."

"Hey, what did you just do?! Where is my present?!"

"You should check out the two most powerful Valkyrie mechs on your ship. I just gave both of them a substantial power-up. You can thank me later!"

"What?! You boosted the wrong mechs, Helena! Those Valkyrie Brunhilds belong to the Glory Seekers, not the Larkinson Clan! They're not my mechs!"

Helena disappeared before he could even finish his words.

"Damnit."

When his shuttle returned to the hangar bay of the Spirit of Bentheim, the people who had come to gawk at the changed Valkyrie mechs had all retreated from the center.

The reason?

The Valkyrie Brunhilds had all been dosed with a couple of hundred extra Ves worth of death energy!

The drastic change caused the mechs to become a lot closer to Helena, not that they needed a lot of help in that. His sister's glow became so thick and palpable around the machines that no mech technician would ever dare to get close to service the machines in person!

"Ugh, what am I going to do with these two machines?"

The Glory Seekers already intended to upgrade them into full expert mechs, which they surprisingly thought they could do with minimal intervention from himself.

Helena's move had made this a little harder, but as long as the Glory Seekers succeeded in their conversion attempt, the mechs of the new pair of female expert pilots would definitely turn into twin nightmares for any organic life!

"Hm, these mechs don't need all of that death energy. I should lighten the load."

Ves brought over a P-stone and siphoned away a small amount of death energy from both machines. While he hadn't decided what to do with it yet, he felt it was worth it to experiment with it later on when he developed his next big luminar crystal weapon.

He already had an interesting experimental concept in mind.

The Amastendira was arguably his main solution against expert mechs and other extraordinary threats. Its Instrument of Vengeance was still the single most powerful luminar crystal weapon of his clan.

What if it was possible for him to superimpose the Instrument of Vengeance with a spiritual version of the same weapon?

The overlap between a material firearm and a spiritual firearm might produce an unprecedentedly lethal combination, one that was especially deadly against all manner of biomonsters!

The phase whales would probably cry if they ever got struck by such a bizarre new weapon system!

#### Chapter 4013 Maximizing Yields

Ves already missed Helena's presence.

It was quite a surprise to learn that the Superior Mother took the initiative to birth a new daughter, thereby expanding his close family in the most abrupt fashion possible.

Though Helena was never fundamentally a human, Ves didn't really care about the species of his family. His birth mother had turned herself into undead apparition while his second mother was one of his own spiritual products!

After spending time and working with a lot of different design spirits, he became accustomed to their presence.

He pretty much regarded them all as energy-based life forms and a different category of species altogether.

Some of them were pretty awful and dangerous. Entities such as the Unending One, Nyxie and the Compact sorcerers were not only powerful, but extremely dangerous and hostile. It took a lot of effort and extraordinary measures to put down any of these monsters.

However, there were good individuals among different species as well. Entities such as Qilanxo and Zeigra were originally exobeasts who had come to accept the win-win arrangement they had made with the Larkinsons.

Ves appreciated his artificial spiritual products even more because he understood their nature to a greater degree. He also made sure that they were loyal and positively predisposed towards the Larkinsons, so the chance that they would ever turn on him was extremely low.

He did not bother to determine whether he should regard them as gods, demons, parasites, undead souls or any other weird definition. These words were ultimately labels that made it easier to fit spiritual entities into a neat box.

As someone who relied on discoveries and innovations to achieve breakthroughs in his work, Ves resisted the convenience of using these labels himself. Calling them gods or dark gods would only lead him to close his mind to many possibilities and ignore a lot of truths that did not fit the classic definition of gods.

Though it was unavoidable for humans to develop heuristic biases, a real scientist must do his best to maintain an open mind and question every assumption!

This was why Ves never took his sister seriously when she claimed she was a god. This was merely a delusion on her part and one that he hoped to correct in their future interactions.

As her big brother, he had a duty to lead Helena back onto the right path!

"Wait a second." Ves blinked. "Since when did I become an overprotective brother?"

Venerable Brutus Wodin and Venerable Imon Ingvar both came to mind. He always felt irked whenever those two dummies acted disproportionately whenever there was any question about the safety of their respective sisters.

Ves never understood why they went overboard so many times. Gloriana and Casella were both smart and could already take care of themselves without needing any unsolicited help from their brothers.

In hindsight, the reason why he thought that Brutus and Imon were so silly was because he never grew up alongside siblings himself.

Now that he gained a little sister all of a sudden, he spontaneously discovered that he had gained an entirely new set of instincts.

As he compared his current self to his past self, he realized that he had developed a lot more rational impulses. He wanted to spend more time on helping and teaching his sister despite the fact that she was born strong and could already take care of herself for the most part.

"Is this what every brother goes through? It doesn't feel that bad, to be honest."

This was the most insidious part about his new instincts and impulses. He felt incredibly rewarded whenever he could make Helena smile or laugh. He felt just as delighted as his new sister when he gifted her his Death Lotus. It was as if he had developed an entirely new addiction, one that centered around pleasing his new relative!

"This is the power of love, I guess."

He felt it was quite fascinating how his love for his sister substantially changed his mindset and rearranged his priorities.

Not only did he develop a lot of affection for his sister, he also felt more of a connection to his parents.

Before meeting Helena, his connection to his birth parents had already been fading over time. They were separated from each other by an enormous distance, so much so that Ves didn't even know if it was ever possible to meet his father in person ever again!

The emergence of Helena reversed this growing estrangement. He became more connected to the events in the Nyxian Gap. The fact that Helena could act as a direct messenger between him and his parents gave him a far better channel to speak to them than the finicky and limited Xona Communication Crystals.

That didn't mean the alien crystals had suddenly turned redundant. It was better to keep them around in case Helena found it difficult to manifest herself in the Red Ocean.

"Let's handle the rest of the mess created by Helena's birth."

The appearance of the Daughter of Death and the wholesale changes that took place on every single Valkyrie mech in existence produced a lot of questions and confusion to their Hexer owners and users!

Even though many Hexers welcomed the birth of a new Hexer goddess with delight, that did not mean that they were able to adjust to the changes without any incidents.

The fundamental properties of the Valkyrie Redeemer and its variants had changed. Many of its features became stronger, but their mech pilots also had to change the way they approached their battles in order to make the best use of the enhanced features.

Ves had to spend an entire day examining the changed Valkyrie mechs, test them in live practice scenarios and exchange results with his fellow Journeymen before he finally drafted a new statement for the public.

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He and his mech company needed to offer clarification on the unannounced changes that affected every Valkyrie mech. No matter whether the changes were positive or negative, it was never good business to drastically alter the products that his customers grew familiar with, especially without any warning or choice.

Although the LMC's lawyers and bureaucrats added a lot of official language to his statement, the message he crafted essentially held different meanings depending on his audience.

To the general public, the changes that affected the Valkyrie mech line was just business as usual.

"The Living Mech Corporations offers active support to its current and certain retired models. We already release regular software updates as part of our ongoing service to our customers. Our Valkyrie Redeemer model and its many variants has received a more drastic update than can better be described as a free upgrade because of the scale and scope of the changes. We apologize for startling our customers with improvements that have been universally met with approval from its existing user base. Our company has learned from this incident and we will endeavor to provide more stable roadmaps of the future development of our ongoing product offerings."

This was basically a story to give most people the explanation they needed so they could turn their attention away from what had happened and poke their noses in someone else's business.

The Hexers needed a more specific explanation, though. Conveniently, each of them were genuine believers in the Superior Mother and had already been introduced to the Daughter of Death through their mechs.

Nonetheless, Ves felt it was necessary to address their situation more clearly so that there would be no confusion about how to handle their new Valkyrie mechs.

"As you have no doubt learned, the Valkyrie Redeemer and its variants are no longer watched over by the Superior Mother anymore. Instead, she had deferred this responsibility to her new offspring, the Daughter of Death. Compared to her progenitor, the Daughter of Death or Helena is much more in tune with death. Her glow is a much



closer match to the Valkyrie mech line and will make your mechs considerably more lethal and effective than before. We will publish additional documents that detail all of the improvements to our products and provide you with an introduction to your new goddess."

After doing his due diligence, Ves finally put this incident behind him. He knew quite well that despite the formidable boost in performance of every Valkyrie mech, there was no chance that the Hexers had any chance of overturning the Komodo War. Not when they lost over half of their territories and most of their standing mech armies.

At best, the Hexer diaspora would have an easier time fighting against their new opponents as they tried to settle elsewhere. The poorer refugees who fled to other star sectors and the more elite refugees who settled in the Red Ocean both benefited substantially from piloting a mech that not only produced a more effective deterrent against enemy mech pilots, but also grew with each slain life!

That last part was a new growth mechanism that fascinated Ves for a time.

He had never explicitly designed a mech that grew stronger by killing the lives that stood in its way.

"The older and more often-used Valkyrie mechs will definitely become a big killer if they manage to remain operational!"

Ves could not imagine how strong they became if they reached an advanced stage of growth. He did not dare to make any assumptions about the limits it could reach.

"Whatever the case, it won't be easy to accumulate enough death energy."

Typical mech battles did not result in that many casualties. Mechs were all big and relatively tough and difficult to defeat. They were also lifeless for the most part so the Valkyrie mechs didn't gain anything from destroying the opposing machines.

What truly mattered was killing the opposing mech pilots, but they were usually well-protected and could always choose to eject their cockpits in order to escape the reach of their enemies.

Ves frowned deeper. "There's a potential problem here. Since the Valkyrie mechs can clearly become stronger and more effective in battle, then their owners and pilots have a clear motivation to kill as many people as possible!"

This was a perverse incentive and one that could spell a lot of trouble for Ves and the LMC!

Mech designers were already known as the merchants of death in certain circles and the changes to the Valkyrie mech line would only add to the criticism!



However, the new changes did not necessarily have to be a negative influence on human society.

He knew that Helena was able to derive death energy from slaying any life form, especially when they were sentient.

"The Valkyrie mechs can become insanely strong as long as they harvest a lot of alien lives!"

This was a great use for the mechs once they arrived in the Red Ocean!

Although the weapon loadouts of marauder mechs weren't as efficient as striker mechs and artillery mechs when it came to the mass slaughter of indigenous alien populations, the Valkyrie mech line could still do a mean amount of damage with its submachine gun and spear!

Ves decided to write another short statement directed to the Hexers in order to remind them where they could best utilize their newly-upgraded mechs.

"This is a win-win relationship!"

As long as he encouraged the Hexers to go out and cleanse more planets of alien life, Helena would be able to receive more death energy and accelerate her growth!

"In the future, I should design an even more efficient mech for this purpose! How about a doom crawler?"

He already had vague plans to design a doom crawler, but it wasn't until now that he had stumbled upon the perfect design spirit for the job!

Not only would humanity be able to prep the conquered planets for human habitation faster, but Helena would also be able to harvest the energies released by the deaths of billions if not trillions of alien lives, thereby maximizing the yield of committing genocide!

"This is perfect!"

If he didn't already have a lot of mech design projects on his plate, he would have started work on his next birthday present for his new sister!

## Chapter 4014 Negotiation Strategies

With all of the excitement triggered by Helena's birth, it took a bit of time before Ves turned his attention back to his more immediate priorities.

He was scheduled to create a new companion spirit for Jovy Armalon quite soon.

He needed to get to work on his many design projects.

He also had to convince the Aduc Family to accept his terms and pass on the secret for developing spiritual potential!

While Ves prepared for his next meeting with Matriarch Erexia Aduc, his wife confronted him about his sister.

"Ves! Why didn't you introduce me to your sister?!"

"I wanted to talk to her first." He replied. "No offense, Gloriana, but I don't think my sister needs to hear your notions about gods."

"What do you mean by that?! She's the daughter of the Superior Mother! She is a born proto-god! In fact, with how powerful she appears to be, she is already a goddess in truth! She's the best sister-in-law that I could have!"

Ves wanted to palm his face. This was exactly the kind of talk that he wanted to keep away from Helena!

Gloriana smirked at him. "Fortunately, I already introduced myself to Helena, no thanks to you. There are so many Valkyrie mechs in our fleet that her glow is everywhere. We already had a little chat, though I didn't get a hold of her for long."

"What? You talked to her already?"

He shouldn't be surprised at this. Helena could reach out to anyone close to the Valkyrie mechs.

Usually, she shouldn't have any reason to make contact with ordinary people, but Gloriana's was different.

As her brother's wife, Helena had many reasons to pay extra attention to Gloriana!

What was worse was that Gloriana's fanatical devotion to hexism and the Superior Mother would undoubtedly extend towards Helena!

He knew better than to persuade his wife to stop worshipping Helena as a goddess. Gloriana couldn't be persuaded when it came to matters of faith and the fact that Helena was powerful enough to moonlight as a deity did not help matters either!

He instead approached his daughter and picked her up in his arms.

His baby girl had been playing with a big plushy tiger before her father lifted her up. She turned and gazed at him in confusion.

"Papa...?"

"I have great news for you. You've got a new aunt, Aurelia. She's family!"

"Aunt?"

"That is what you call the sister of papa or mama. She's family, just like you and me. When she shows up, she won't be present in her physical body. She will come in a form that is similar to that of Mana and Blinky."

Mew!

As soon as Ves called her name, Mana popped out of Aurelia's head and cutely floated in the air. The spiritual kitten radiated a sense of pure and warm energy that reminded Ves of a mix between Lufa and the Golden Cat.

"When you meet your aunt in the future, don't mistake her as a god. She's still human like you and I. She's just a bit special. Don't listen to your mother when she claims that your aunt is a goddess. There are no gods in our family. We are just a perfectly normal human family, do you get that, Aurelia?"

His daughter had already stopped paying attention to him. She had gone back to playing with her plushy tiger!

"...I'll wait until you've grown a bit older."

Once Ves said goodbye to his wife and daughter, he met up with Minister Shederin in his office.

The foreign minister had taken charge of the negotiations after Ves dealt with all of the Helena business. From what he heard, the Aduc Family hadn't budged at all when it came to the most serious and controversial demand of the Larkinson Clan.

"What you are asking is nothing less than betrayal." Shederin told Ves once they both settled in the office. "You are essentially asking the Aduc Family to violate its morals, its traditions and its honor for material gain. Do you see why this sounds like a devil's deal?"

"There's no point in clinging to useless traditions." Ves retorted. "Besides, morals and honor do not necessarily bring the Aduc Family back to its former height. Centuries have passed since they were exiled from the Terran Confederation. What have they done since then? They devolved into second-raters and never made much progress in getting back! If I was in their position, then I would have reached the pinnacle of the terraforming industry by now! These guys are so passive and unwilling to break from their routine that they won't amount to anything if they maintain this attitude."

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"The problems and faults of the Aduc Family are not our concern. Not yet, at least. They are not on our side yet, and they may not end up cooperating as closely as you anticipate. It is up to them to choose whether to accept our push or resist our efforts to change their attitudes."

Not everyone was willing to take risks in order to achieve a better life for themselves and their descendants.

A lot of people who were born in less-than-ideal circumstances were perfectly happy with their current lot in lives. They might not be as wealthy as first-raters, but they weren't as poor and destitute as dwarven mining slaves.

In fact, Ves used to be in their position as well. Though average third-class citizens were looked down upon by a lot of people, people like the Larkinsons in the past were perfectly happy with their place in society.

The Bright Republic wasn't a bad place to live either, though a lot of other third-raters in the same star sector couldn't say the same.

Even a weak alien race like the sandmen managed to wipe out trillions of people! They had been able to overrun so many states because none of them possessed the strength to resist the sandman invasion.

Therefore, Ves was not fooled by the relative prosperity the Larkinson Clan had attained in the past few years. Though it was undoubtedly true that he and his clan had risen remarkably quickly, he still had a lot to go before he reached his ultimate destination!

The Aduc Family had the potential to accelerate his rise, but in order for that to happen, he had to sway the careful Aduc to make bolder decisions!

Breaking traditions and violating rules for personal gain were second nature to Ves. As long as leaking an important secret resulted in a profitable transaction without inviting disaster, he would do so in a heartbeat!

He was quite disappointed that a supposedly good leader like Matriarch Erexia Aduc was unwilling to make the decision that provided the greatest benefits to her family.

"What is your advice?" Ves plainly asked.

Minister Shederin leaned forward. "I suggest you choose between two different negotiation strategies. We can adopt a slow and steady strategy that entails holding frequent talks and exchanges with the Aduc. If we cannot persuade them into making the desired concessions right away, then we should persuade them why it is best for

them to do so over time. Invite their members to our fleet. We should especially focus on deepening our friendship with their younger and more impressionable heirs."

Ves recalled that the reason why they succeeded in convincing the Murphy Family to join the Open Consortium was by subverting the heirs of Madame Gelly Murphy.

What Shederin suggested was the same approach but strung out over time in order to alter the mindsets of the Aducs over time.

The success rate of this strategy should not be low. Ves believed that the Aduc Family would probably develop a much greater appreciation of what he could offer if its members became more familiar with the benefits of obtaining an ancestral spirit.

"This strategy is too slow to produce results." Ves shook his head. "I don't want to waste months or years of our time on slowly boiling a frog alive. I want to throw the frog over a grill and munch on its legs shortly afterwards."

"That is why we have also devised a faster strategy, sir. Instead of trying to change the minds of the Aducs over time, we can shock them into making the desired decisions through multiple ways. One of the more direct moves we can make is to show off our strongest 'spirits' and tell them that we can turn their Old Lady into one as well."

Ves slowly nodded. "I think that can work, but a hard sell can easily backfire. What if the Aducs dig in and remain stubborn?"

"Then we need to resort to other ploys." The old man replied. "To be more precise, we need to increase the heat and add more pressure to them. One of the biggest reasons why the Aducs do not feel much pressure to accept our deal is because their Old Lady is still in decent shape. While she has already started to show signs of deterioration, trees are highly resilient organisms by nature, especially when the Aducs take good care of her. It will take a couple of decades to a century before their tree reaches the point of no return."

"Are you suggesting that we push the Old Lady to this point in advance, minister?"

"That is correct, sir. It sounds ruthless, and it is not an ideal way to start a friendship with the Aduc Family, but as long as we can reverse the Old Lady's malaise and make her stronger and healthier than ever, then the recency bias and the contrast effect will help with clearing the foul air. However, the premise of making this work is if we are the only party that is capable of healing the Old Lady. If we are not the sole saviors that the Aducs can turn to, then we will be shooting ourselves in the foot."

Ves fell into thought. The plan that Shederin had introduced to him sounded like a fast but risky way to resolve the current impasse.

It shouldn't be too difficult to sabotage the Old Lady. The Aducs may have implemented a lot of security measures in their Green Sanctum, and they might be familiar enough with spiritual engineering to stop any sneaky spiritual intruders, but Ves did not get stumped by these obstacles.

Just recently, Helena showed off her ability to project her death energy at a huge distance with impressive accuracy!

As long as she controlled her power output, it should be possible for her or another skilled wielder of a spiritual firearm to sabotage the Old Lady despite the fact that she was rooted in the middle of the Aduc Family's flagship!

Ves rubbed his smooth-shaven chin. "I can take care of the tree if we need to encourage the Aducs to make a quick decision, but I'm not sure whether we should resort to such an extreme solution."

"Are you having second thoughts?" Shederin raised his eyebrow.

"I get why you told me that the Aduc Family are not in our camp yet, but I can't help but treat them like this. It is one thing to encourage them into making a decision that we believe will ultimately benefit them. It is another thing to force them into making a decision in our favor by relying on coercion, blackmail and extortion. Do we really need to tarnish our honor to such an extent in order to achieve a favorable result?"

Minister Shederin gazed steadily at Ves. "You have no problem in encouraging the Aducs to do the same. What if I tell you that as long as you sabotage the Old Lady, I can close a deal with the Aduc Family within 24 hours? You do not even need to step forward yourself. I can be the 'villain' who will exert all of the pressure and attract their animosity. You can come in after we have made an agreement and personally bring their Old Lady back from the brink of destruction."

"Are you serious?!"

"I have already grasped the mentality and the rhythm of the Aduc Family." The diplomat confidently smiled. "Just because they are stubborn doesn't mean they are unassailable. We only need to make a single opening to overcome their defenses."

"If that's the case, then wait for my news! I will make sure their stupid tree will start to rot within a couple of days!"

Chapter 4015 Cutthroat Frontier

Normally, the Green Sanctum served as a refuge for the members of the Aduc Family.

The biome that the Aducs reverently set up in the center of their terraforming capital ship not only served as their secular temple, but also gave them a close simulation of life on Old Earth.

The Green Dream was not the first big terraforming vessel utilized by the Aduc Family. The Green Sanctum housed within her hull was also not unique.

Nevertheless, the Aduc Family, who often resided on various starships for months if not years on end due to the nature of their work, could never function properly if they could not immerse themselves in a natural, Earth-like environment.

During the times when the workers of Gaia Worldcrafting Services had been assigned to terraform an alien planet, such precious environments might be many light-years away from their postings!

This made it even more important to provide every Aduc access to a sanctuary where they could remove themselves from the cold embrace of their starships or the inhospitable terrain of their terraforming targets.

Practically every member of every generation of the Aduc Family visited the Green Sanctum at least once in their lifetimes.

Many of them visited the important biome every month or every week if they were on assignment.

Even though the Aducs rarely rearranged the layout of the Green Sanctum, none of the family members ever got tired of visiting the same sights and smelling the same flowers.

The familiarity built up over years had become a psychological refuge to them. No matter how much the galaxy outside of their family changed, they could always take comfort in the constancy and permanence of their Green Sanctum.

As the centerpiece and the purpose of the biome, the Old Lady was by far the most central and important feature of this biome.

Try as they might, the Aducs never succeeded in obtaining any other authentic piece of nature from Old Earth.

As the cradle of the human race, the planet had long achieved a mythical status in human civilization. Many people who were born many light-years away from Old Earth would do anything to get even a single grain of sand from the homeworld of their species!

Naturally, there was no way the Terrans would ever allow their most precious heritage to be hollowed out. A single grain of sand might be nothing to the entire planet, but if an



endless amount of humans all made the same demand, then soon there would be nothing left of humanity's starting point!

The laws regarding the export of goods had only become more and more restrictive. The few products that the Terrans exported from Old Earth these days were exclusively derived out of cleansed and purified raw materials imported from other planets.

Even then, their value was inestimable as the mere fact that they had been grown on the most famous planet of human civilization was enough to elevate their importance!

It was not a stretch to say that the value of the Old Lady alone exceeded that of the Green Dream!

The Aducs were quite aware of the value of their most precious heirloom. In fact, their generational interaction with the oak tree had made them even more attached to the centuries-old organism.

Every Aduc became so familiar with the Old Lady that they could reimagine her appearance in their minds with a high degree of accuracy!

Every branch, every bark pattern and every mark was seared into their minds as they revered the Old Lady as if she was their actual ancestor.

It was for that reason that the Aducs who entered the Green Sanctum this morning couldn't process the radical changes to the biome.

The alarms sounded out first. The Aducs had implemented a lot of hidden monitoring and security measures in their biome compartment. Any major change would definitely trigger an alarm, and the sounds and notifications changed depending on the severity of the deviations.

The alarm that sounded throughout the entire Aduc fleet startled everyone!

Even the Aducs who enjoyed their rest had been forced awake!

"This alarm... the Old Lady! Something happened to the Old Lady!"

"A life-threatening situation has occurred in the Green Sanctum! The Old Lady is under threat!"

When the initial responders arrived in the center of the Green Sanctum, they became so shocked that their hearts almost froze!

In fact, there were other Aducs who already saw what had happened in the Green Sanctum when they checked the logs and security feeds.



However, they were so unwilling or unable to accept what the monitoring system presented to them that they sent out men in order to verify whether a prankster had hacked their sensor feeds!

"Please let this be a prank. Please don't turn this image into a reality. The Old Lady must not be harmed!"

Sadly for the Aducs who were hoping that the electronic systems had been deceiving them, the first-hand reports of the first responders immediately dashed their hopes!

"Sir... the Old Lady... is drooping!"

She was doing more than that. Her leaves had yellowed and her bark was beginning to crack. The scent she exuded was no longer as fresh and full of vitality as before.

Even the sense of woody life that she had been emanating had weakened! Anyone who stepped close to the tree only felt as if her rot had already reached an advanced stage!

"It is as if she only needs a single push to fall entirely!"

The Aducs soon deployed specialized scanning equipment to figure out the complete state of the oak tree.

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A lot of data poured in that showed that the Old Lady had deteriorated drastically without any reasonable explanation. Though the Aducs weren't able to figure out the exact cause or trigger of this change, the outcome was clear.

So much of the tree had aged or decayed in a short amount of time that her once-strong and vigorous plant cells were behaving as if they were on their last legs!

The best botanists and other biological specialists of the Aduc Family did not sit still while the Old Lady looked as if a single bug or parasite could tip her over.

They broke their own policy of letting the oak tree develop by herself and employed numerous advanced technological solutions. The specialists tried their best to restore her condition or at least halt her deterioration.

"Nothing is working!" Pesca Aduc told her mother in a despairing tone. "Biologically, most if not all of our treatments should have taken effect by now. Our race has been living alongside oak trees for a long time and we have figured out everything on how they work. Every single measure we took should have made a positive difference, but nothing has happened! The nutrients and other substances we have injected into the Old Lady are just sitting there as if the cells are all starving to death while on a hunger strike!"

"Are you saying that the Old Lady is trying to kill herself?"

"No! The Old Lady must still be clinging to life! The reason why we haven't noticed that is because she has grown too weak and infirm to take care of herself anymore. If her approximate lifespan was 120 to 180 years before this incident took place, now we estimate that she only has 4 to 7 months to live!"

"What?!"

All of the surrounding Aducs were absolutely frightened by this revised estimate!

A tree that was in decline was not necessarily a big deal. There was so much time to find a solution that the Aducs never felt a great sense of urgency.

All of that had changed once they came around to the shocking new reality. If they didn't do anything, then their only authentic heirloom from Old Earth might actually perish!

As the third offspring of Matriarch Erexix and a well-trained exobiologist, Pesca Aduc possessed a more thorough understanding of the Old Lady's precise condition than her immediate relatives.

Matriarch Erexix Aduc and many fellow family members were primarily terraformers and possessed greater understanding in the fields of exogeology and ecosystem transformations.

This was why Pesca felt the need to clarify her understanding further.

"That isn't all. Though I have just said that the Old Lady should hold on for a few months, the closer she approaches the point of no return, the more cells she will lose! Her leaves, her branches, her roots and even her main trunk will die off and rot over time! If we take too much time saving her, then who knows how much of our precious tree will be left!"

The weight on their shoulders had grown even heavier than before! The damage to the Old Lady was extensive, mysterious and practically irreversible.

After an hour of engaging in analysis and problem solving, the Aducs finally resigned themselves to the new reality.

"There is nothing fundamentally wrong with the body of the Old Lady." Matriarch Erexix Aduc stated as she pressed her palm on the cracked and feeble bark of the oak tree. "The root of her problem has always been her soul. The patriarch of the Larkinson Clan was right. She is sick from the inside. The only difference is that her condition has weakened to a drastic degree. If you don't believe me, just close your eyes and feel."

The surrounding Aducs did as she suggested and immediately felt that the presence of the Old Lady had indeed worsened since they were last present in the Green Sanctum!

"This isn't a coincidence." Kievenar Aduc stated. "Only a few days after we have invited an outsider into our Green Sanctum, our most important heirloom has suffered a serious decline."

Tierna Aduc had made the connection as well and grew furious!

"Those dirty Larkinsons! We trusted Ves Larkinson to respect the Old Lady, but instead he brought her to the brink of death! For what?! Weren't we supposed to be allies?!"

"We're not allies yet." Matriarch Erexī Aduc corrected her daughter. "We were brought together by the Transhumanists, but before we have signed any formal agreements, we are still strangers to each other. This means that we have not established any rules that prohibit foul play among ourselves."

Her two daughters looked as if they had just eaten a rotten sandwich.

"What are you saying...?"

As the future leader of the Aduc Family, Kievenar Aduc understood his mother's point the best. He let out a tired sigh.

"All is fair in love and war. The Larkinson Clan wants to cooperate with our family, but only on its terms. We have been holding out because we are not so eager to make so many concessions. The best way the Larkinsons can make us lower our resistance is if we are put in a situation where we have little choice but to accept their terms."

"You mean... they deliberately brought our Old Lady to near-death in order to get what they want from us? That... that's illegal! They have just attempted to murder our the Old Lady!"

Both Matriarch Erexī Aduc and Kievenar Aduc grimaced.

"So what if the Larkinsons behaved improperly? Do you think the local authorities in Davute will do anything? They will not meddle in this kind of business! The MTA and the Transhumanists will not move on our behalf either. This is the frontier, and competition is much more cutthroat in this dwarf galaxy! From the moment we have passed through the Red Ocean, we have implicitly accepted the reality that we must rely more on ourselves to solve our problems."

"Even if we can make the MTA intervene on our behalf, it will hardly go as smoothly as you think." The Aduc Matriarch added. "We have no proof the Larkinsons are responsible. Certainly, they have the motive and the means, but as long as we cannot

show iron-clad proof, we cannot make any progress. This is especially the case when the Larkinson Patriarch is a tier 6 galactic citizen."

A tier 6 galactic citizen!

The eyes of all three scions of the Aduc Matriarch widened.

This was quite a big deal, especially when it came to galactic bureaucratic processes and matters concerning disputes.

One of the general rules of the galactic community was that it was much more difficult for lower-tiered galactic citizens to trouble those at the higher tiers.

Since their mother was only a tier 8 galactic citizen, the burden of proof to make the MTA intervene was much greater!

In other words, unless the Aduc Family could provide hard and undeniable proof that the Larkinsons or an agent of them sabotaged their Old Lady, they could forget about obtaining the Association's support!

#### Chapter 4016 Over A Barrel

Matriarch Erexu Aduc and Kievenar Aduc were both part of the command layer of the Aduc Family.

The current and future leader of the Aduc Family had not only studied terraforming, but also politics, business, administration and management.

They needed to develop competencies in many different fields in order to make sure the Aduc Family could continue to survive and make a living in a constantly changing galactic human community.

Tierna Aduc and Pesca Aduc did not possess the same broadened perspective. They had both devoted their lives to terraforming and exobiology with all of their hearts, so they were not exposed to the power plays that took place between different parties.

For this reason, they still had a lot of difficulty understanding why the Larkinsons, who the Aduc had approached with plenty of goodwill, could act so vilely all of a sudden!

"These scoundrels!"

"They're worse than scoundrels. They're hypocritical scum! I thought that they were honorable warriors and honest mech providers, but it turns out that they have no limits in what they are willing to do to get ahead!"

"That is not necessarily a bad trait to have these days." Kievenar noted.

"What did you say, brother?!"

"He is correct." Matriarch Erexia Aduc spoke. "What the Larkinsons have done is not unusual among the larger, more powerful and more successful human organizations. The reason why they have all grown considerably faster in size, wealth and power than us is because they are much more willing to make the expedient decisions even if they have to violate rules, conventions and even taboos in the process."

Her younger and more innocent daughters could not accept this kind of conduct. They never heard their mother speak so clearly about the reality of doing business at this level!

"Why did we never hear about this before?" Tierna Aduc asked.

"Because we previously maintained our distance from these ambitious parties. As long as we kept to ourselves and operated within our familiar territory, the chances of coming into conflict with dangerous groups was low. We managed to fly under most people's sensors for many years until we took the initiative to change our strategy. Ever since we entered the Red Ocean, we could no longer remain as uninvolved as before. When we were exposed to the Larkinson Clan, our chances of remaining in our comfort zone had dropped even more."

Kievenar Aduc shook his head in resignation. "To be honest, with the way that pioneers in the Red Ocean have operated, it was only a matter of time before we would attract the predatory gaze of a larger and more powerful group. We should be fairly lucky that we have only attracted the attention of the Larkinson Clan so far. As much as you object to their behavior, they do not fundamentally wish to exploit us or turn us into their vassals. There is still a measure of mutual benefit in their proposals."

Not every Aduc had good feelings about the likely culprits at the moment. There were even those that wished to burn all of their nascent ties with the Larkinson Clan due to this incident regardless of any directives of the Transhumanist Faction!

"The Larkinsons have brought death to the Old Lady! They have attempted to murder the heart of our family! It makes no sense to smile and shake their hands after what they have done! We should leave this cursed star system right away!"

"What would that solve for us?" Matriarch Erexia calmly shot back at the family elder who proposed this course of action. "Our Old Lady is almost terminally ill. We have already failed to reverse her decline when she was still in decent shape, and our chances of saving her have dropped even more since then. The only way we can save her is if we give in to the demands of the Larkinsons. Though they have acted with ill intent, I do not believe they have deliberately brought our living heirloom to the brink of death unless they have a countermeasure in their possession that can bring her back to life."

"We cannot allow our anger to lead us to a worse future. Saving the Old Lady is more important than spitting the Larkinsons in the face." Kievenar concurred. "Besides, if you think about it, the deal offered by the Larkinson Clan is not all that bad. While they are eager to pull us into a dangerous vortex, the payoff is much greater than the profit of completing ten terraforming projects. They have even promised that they can make the Old Lady evolve to a higher state."

"Do you actually believe that, brother?"

"Their work speaks for themselves."

As the higher ups of the Aduc Family evaluated their options and held discussions on how to move forward, most leaders recognized that they had lost this particular game.

When the Aduc next met with the Larkinsons in order to advance their negotiations, Minister Shederin Purnesse no longer encountered as many obstacles as before.

"My condolences to your family." The old man sympathetically said as his expression conveyed genuine sadness. "No group should suffer the pain of losing a beloved symbol and piece of heritage. We cannot imagine how much you and your fellow family members are fearing for the future of your Old Lady. Is she still able to persist for the time being?"

"Our Old Lady has always been resilient. She may surprise us in the future."

"We will be the first to offer our congratulations to your family if that happens." Shederin politely responded.

Kievenar Aduc, who led this round of negotiations on behalf of his mother, resisted the urge to punch the sincere-looking ambassador in the face.

No matter how pleasant and innocent the envoy acted, the Aduc scion knew quite well that the Larkinsons were the chief culprits of this entire calamity! They had by far the strongest motive as they clearly obtained an immense advantage after the change in circumstances.

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Although the Aduc never found out how the Old Lady suffered such a great loss in vitality, they were near-certain that the Larkinson Clan secretly employed mysterious means to achieve this result.

The fantastical tales surrounding the Larkinson Clan and the astonishing combat footage circulating on the galactic net showed that these bastards had mastered a variety of strange methods, including a few that could directly affect living organisms while passing through many forms of obstacles!

In fact, the Aducs discovered that an alarming incident had taken place in the vicinity of the Larkinson fleet. The people of the clan had fired a strange and powerful energy beam into space!

Given that this incident only happened a short time before the Old Lady had such a great loss, Kievenar Aduc was 99.99 percent certain that the Larkinsons were the ultimate masterminds behind this sequence of events!

"Your kind words are appreciated, Mr. Purnesse. Shall we proceed with the main talks?"

There was no point in mentioning the obvious out loud. Even if both sides were aware of the actual truth, neither side would gain any advantage by bringing the issue out into the open.

The Aducs would only make it harder for themselves to accept any eventual deal while the Larkinsons could just categorically deny any allegations unless confronted by hard proof that didn't exist.

Kievenar Aduc had a responsibility to work towards the best possible outcome for his family, and if that meant signing a contract with a devil, then he would just have to do his best to forget about the unpleasant context!

As he put on a lower posture during the negotiations, the talks achieved meteoric progress.

The Aducs had an active interest in securing a deal as fast as possible now that the Old Lady visibly decayed with each passing day!

Unfortunately, despite Kievenar's best efforts, he could not hide the desperation from his side. Even if he put on the most convincing act possible, there was no way the Larkinsons would miss the opportunity to exploit their new advantage!

"I believe you are misunderstanding our position." Minister Shederin slightly frowned as he sat on the other side of the negotiating table. "The demands presented by our clan are not opening bids meant to give us more room for bargaining. They are ultimatums that clearly convey the price to obtain our cooperation. If other organizations fully understand what we are offering in return, then they would wholeheartedly accept our terms without hesitation."

Kievenar Aduc scoffed in response. "There are not that many organizations to begin with that can cooperate with you on the T Institute. Our family is the only possible partner that you can cooperate with. Your clan wouldn't even know where to go if we refuse your terms."

"Can you afford to reject our aid, Mr. Aduc? I wonder about that. While we may have a desire to partner with you, we will not suffer any losses if we fail to attain our goal. As for



your family, the consequences of leaving without finding a cure for your dying tree are too dire to mention. Are you truly willing to risk this outcome just because you are unable to accept our generosity?"

Pff. Generosity, his butt! The Larkinsons knew they had the Aducs over a barrel and ruthlessly exploited their superior position!

After a few more exchanges that were filled with veiled threats and doomed attempts to shift the balance of power, both sides decided that they had enough of this theater performance.

"Tell it to me straight, Purnesse. If we proceed with the proposed agreement, will your clan be able to restore the Old Lady in full?" Kievenar asked with a serious expression. "We do not wish to play any further games and we will not accept any half-measures. If your clan is unable or unwilling to address the root of our problem, we would rather take our chances elsewhere."

Minister Shederin smiled. "Our patriarch has already made it clear that we can make your Old Lady better in a single session. We have no interest in stringing your family along. We do as we say and always abide by our promises. You can trust our reputation for honesty and integrity. Every business partner we have worked with has earned remarkable gains and have never regretted their decision. Your family shall not be an exception."

He knew that as long as he managed to rope in the Aducs, it would be nearly impossible for the latter to get out! The Larkinsons had mastered numerous different measures and strategies that strengthened their bonds with their various allies and partners.

The Aduc Family would have to give up a lot of benefits and pay an immense price to separate itself from the Larkinson Clan!

As long as the Aducs were rational enough, they should never think about divorcing themselves from the Larkinsons once they signed an agreement!

Therefore, Minister Shederin had no problem with promising the Aducs that their Old Lady would immediately become healthy again.

Ves had personally assured him that he and his clan possessed the power to accomplish this near-impossible feat!

At the end of the session, the two sides had yet to come to an agreement.

However, they moved so much closer to each other that a deal was already close at hand. They just needed to draft and agree on the final details of their extensive contract!



Shederin and Kievenar both stood up and shook hands with each other.

"You and your family will not regret your decision. Work with our clan, and we will protect you from the predators that roam the Red Ocean. We may not rank among the top, but that means you can get a great bargain by cooperating with us when we are still on the rise. Ten or twenty years from now, we would never agree to hand over 25 percent ownership of a revolutionary new research institution. You should feel lucky that we have granted you this honor."

"Yes... Lucky..."

#### Chapter 4017 Reluctance

It did not take long for the negotiation teams to hash out a final agreement.

The resulting treaty largely aligned with the terms that Ves initially proposed. The Larkinsons essentially gained everything they asked for, even if the terms were disproportionately in their favor.

The Aducs on the other hand had little choice but to hold back their resentment and give in to the inevitable.

They still harbored a lot of hard feelings towards the Larkinsons, but the leaders of the family had issued strict instructions not to do anything that would bring the two parties into a confrontation.

Fortunately, none of the Aducs had risen up and tried to pierce the facade that made it easy for the two sides to find common ground with each other.

The Aducs were accustomed to obeying instructions from above. None of them dared to engage in any form of rebellion and insubordination, especially when the continued existence of the Old Lady was at stake.

One of the more unfortunate consequences of the Larkinson Clan's secret ploy was that most of the Aducs no longer cared about how much they could gain from this partnership.

They just wanted the Larkinsons to heal their damned tree!

Given all of the unpleasantities surrounding this deal, both sides decided to hold the signing ceremony in a more private setting. They had agreed to make the crucial step in one of the smaller formal ceremonial halls within the Green Dream.

Neither side broadcasted the formal occasion nor invited too many dignitaries to witness this important event.

There was no need to bring too many people. Any additional person presented one additional risk factor that could blow up the deal. Perhaps there were still plenty of Aducs that couldn't quite stomach this depressing outcome, but Matriarch Erexí Aduc and Kievenar Aduc were absolutely unwilling to accept any other alternatives!

Ves grinned as he picked up the autopen and allowed it to draw a signature that was full of flair on the document.

The matriarch of the Aduc Family followed suit with a plainer and cleaner signature.

Their lawyers did the rest. They submitted the documents to the MTA in order to make everything official.

"From now on, we are allies." Ves happily said. "You will not regret this decision. This will be the start of a fruitful cooperation between our two organizations. I hope that in the future, your Aduc Family will become a part of a new galactic order that propagates a better future for humanity."

"Do you truly believe in that?" Matriarch Erexí asked with plenty of reserve in her voice.

"Why do you sound so surprised? Our clan may be looking to secure a better future for our members, but much of our work is devoted to leading humanity to a better and more prosperous future. I have already shared what I seek to gain from the T Institute. As long as our cooperative venture gains full speed and is able to present one useful application after another, we shall both transform the landscape of the mech community and introduce many more mech pilots and non-mech pilots to the more extraordinary side of reality!"

While Ves painted a grand vision of the future, the Aducs only became more afraid of what might come.

They knew quite well that anyone who wished to alter the status quo of human society in any way would make a lot of enemies in the process!

The more radical the changes, the greater the amount of interest groups that rose up in opposition!

The few Aducs present in the hall shivered even more. What kind of pirate ship had they ended up boarding this time?! How far were these crazy Larkinsons willing to go to realize their grand ambitions!?

"Don't worry. We know what we are doing." Ves tried to reassure his new partners and allies. "Humanity is already charting a new direction. The Crown Uprising and the opening of the Red Ocean are only the heralds of what is to come. It is no longer enough to keep your heads and hope that the coming storms will pass you by. The best

way to ensure that you will be able to be among the winners in these future times is to be more proactive and fight for a greater place!"

His ambitious attitude and his daring approach couldn't help but fascinate a few of the Aducs.

They could no longer avoid becoming a part of the Larkinson Clan's great endeavors.

Since that was the case, they might as well familiarize themselves with what their new allies wished to accomplish and see if they could play a useful role.

Matriarch Erexia still maintained her cool, though. She did not show any obvious reaction towards any of the wild ideas of the Larkinsons. It was far from certain whether the Larkinson Clan would embark on all of these radical plans.

If the Larkinsons and their band of misfits ended up provoking way too many enemies, the Aduc Family might be able to slip away without getting involved.

This was because they chose to join the Open Consortium instead of becoming a part of the much more restrictive Golden Skull Alliance.

Though both organizations were essentially led by the Larkinson Clan, there was a huge world of difference between the two! One of them was mostly a business alliance while the other was overwhelmingly a military alliance!

As much as the Aducs accepted the necessity to get in bed with the Larkinsons, there was no way they wanted to get any closer than they had to. The Open Consortium formed a decent platform of cooperation with the Larkinson Clan, and differed from the Golden Skull Alliance in that it did not set any expectations for military cooperation!

In other words, if the Larkinsons ever got beat up by a terrible opponent, the Aduc Family had no moral or legal obligation to send their own mech troops!

This was the best that Ves could ask from the Aducs considering how they ended up at this junction.

Even if the Larkinsons won over the Aducs without resorting to foul play, there was not that much value to obtaining the terraforming family's military aid.

The Aducs only reluctantly maintained a security force and never prepared to take any offensive actions. Their ability to fight was limited to defending their expensive terraforming assets, yet in many cases they were forced to contract mercenaries in order to obtain adequate protection.

Becoming a permanent member of the Open Consortium was the most suitable outcome all considered.

The two leaders did not spend much time on light chatter.

The hosts were already growing more and more impatient. Matriarch Erexu finally addressed the elephant in the room.

"Are you ready to fulfill one of your promises, patriarch?"

"I can begin to do so, yes. I will have to examine the new state of your Old Lady first before I devise a treatment and evolution plan. It will probably take a few days for me to begin the crucial operation."

The Aducs reluctantly brought Ves and him alone into the Green Sanctum.

This time, the Green Sanctum looked a lot different than before. After the Aducs realized that their precious Old Earth tree had likely suffered an attack without encountering any meaningful resistance, they rapidly upgraded the defensive measures of the Green Sanctum to prevent a possible repeat attack.

The condition of the Old Lady had deteriorated so much that an extra disease might rapidly push her over!

Extra energy shields, prefab metal shields and even a pair of mechs beefed up the defense of the precious tree!

These were extravagant measures, but it showcased how much the Aduc Family cared for just a single tree!

The extra defenses completely ruined the natural ambiance of the biome. Ves found that to be a shame as he liked how well the terraformers managed to simulate the environment of humanity's home planet.

He wanted to tell them that he had no intentions of blasting the Old Lady with another dose of concentrated death energy, but he figured that the Aducs wouldn't appreciate that piece of news.

Once they finally passed through all of the security checkpoints, they reached the low hill at the center where the Old Lady was trying her best to hold on to her remaining vitality.

Ves inwardly winced at the sight. Compared to his first encounter with the precious tree, her second state was worse than he imagined!

Her physical state already looked quite bad. She looked as if she spent a lot of years in a drought-laden desert while at the same time suffering from a number of nasty diseases.

Half of her leaves had already fallen while the rest had grown so yellow and brittle that they were not far from dropping as well.

As much as her physical condition looked distressing, her spiritual state was worse!

The mysterious attack that completely wasn't launched by the Larkinson Clan not only drained or dissipated a huge amount of the Old Lady's accumulated spiritual energy, but also damaged her spiritual core in a way that broke her in a fundamental way!

It would take a lot of effort to heal the cracks and address the trauma that she had suffered, but even then the Old Lady would always bear the scars of the attack.

What was most distressing about the attack was that it also changed the proportions of her spiritual attributes, which effectively changed her domain!

Previously, her domain consisted of a mix between the attributes of wood, life and earth.

The Old Lady's wood attribute was the most prominent while her earth attribute was not as prominent.

This time, it looked as if her spiritual makeup was upside down!

Her wood attribute energy had dwindled until there was only a fraction left. She heavily drained her life attribute energy in her desperate attempt to negate the opposing attribute that was corroding her spirit.

This left her earth attribute energy largely untouched. It was the most resistant element out of the three and it remained stiff even after the Old Lady suffered a lot of damage.

Ves gained a lot of interesting insights from this observation. It turned out that death energy was not universally effective against other forms of spiritual energy.

It made sense that it more easily negated wood and life energy. Unless these energies were more powerful than the opposing death energy, it was far too difficult for them to hold their ground.

He was also able to confirm that earth energy was less susceptible to death energy. It clearly used to be the smallest main attribute of the Old Lady, but it had suddenly become the largest by virtue of its excellent elemental resistance against the power of death!

This was the first time that Ves gained a proper introduction to the concepts of attribute restraint and resistance.

Just knowing that he could take advantage of certain elements to more effectively defend against specific kinds of spiritual attacks was extremely useful for him to know!

The change in the proportions of spiritual attributes was an unpleasant surprise to Ves, but not an insurmountable one. The new design spirit or ancestral spirit that he intended to make only utilized the Old Lady as a source of ingredients.

As long as she retained a sufficient amount of wood energy and life energy, Ves had enough of a base to create a new and improved Old Lady!

Perhaps he could even take advantage of the altered state of the oak tree to take a few creative liberties with his spiritual design!

"Can you do it, Patriarch Larkinson?" The Aduc Matriarch asked.

Ves nodded. "No problem. The process will be a bit more convoluted, but I can guarantee you that my success chance is still close to 100 percent. The only variable that you need to worry about is whether the reborn Old Lady closely matches her original nature. My methods are a bit imprecise. Don't worry. What I will make out of her will still be recognizable to your family."

"Let us hope that will be the case."

#### Chapter 4018 Second Heirloom

There was a reason why Ves not only drove a hard bargain but also resorted to foul play in his clan's negotiations with the Aduc Family.

The Aduc Family possessed a highly useful and relevant secret method that the Larkinson Clan did not possess.

Obviously, this was a grave state of injustice. As a valiant agent of truth and order, it was up to a hero like Ves to correct this travesty!

It was fortunate that despite their old and once-magnificent history, the Aducs had degenerated to the point where they became pushovers.

The Larkinsons used to be easy to bully around as well, but the recent successes of their clan had already given it the qualifications to act as a predator instead of a prey.

Ves grinned. Having tasted the benefits of becoming a carnivore, it felt good to sink his teeth into the flesh of a vulnerable prey. He understood much better why the bigger players liked to use this approach towards weaker parties.

It was a lot easier to gain stuff he wanted through extorting weaklings than to rely on more honest means!

Was there anything wrong with this approach? Plenty! Ves was not blind to the ethical and legal violations of forcing others to hand over their stuff. He himself fell victim to this behavior plenty of times.

The fact that the Mech Trade Association engaged in this behavior as well was the biggest irony to Ves! He and many other citizens had to contribute their earnings, their trade secrets and more to the greedy and insatiable leaders of this massive trans-galactic organization.

Of course, since the MTA had effectively taken over the mandate of ruling human civilization, the mechcers were able to exploit without relying on overly coercive means. They utilized a combination of favorable rules and a monopoly on exclusive benefits to milk their lessers, all the while maintaining a fair and just reputation!

Ves figured it all out. He did not complain too much about giving in to the MTA's demands. Why should he? He was the equivalent to the Aducs in front of the Larkinsons in this case!

No matter how much he resisted an unfair trade deal, he had no choice but to dance to the MTA's tune because he lacked the power and support to resist the pressure!

The only consolation was that the MTA did not go too far because it saw value in maintaining good relations with Ves.

The mechcers also wanted to set up a sustainable farm where it created a culture that encouraged mech designers and other researchers to voluntarily pass on their research results in exchange for scraps.

What Ves did to the Aduc Family was nothing different in this regard.

Sure, he may have been a little bit more heavy-handed than the MTA in his attempt to 'persuade' the Aducs into cooperating with him, but he was looking after their interests as well!

Once the Aduc Family seriously cooperated with the Larkinson Clan and began to develop all kinds of miraculous new applications at the T Institute, Ves was convinced that Matriarch Erexia Aduc and her scions would taste the sugar that came with cooperating with a mech designer as amazing as himself.

Just like the MTA, Ves learned to wield the power of mutually beneficial agreements to form a network of dependable allies and helpers.

He had come quite far since his starting point. Before he knew it, he and his clan established profitable ties with the Survivalist Faction, the Transhumanist Faction, the Hexer people, the Glory Seekers, the Cross Clan, the Wild Fighter Association, the Heavensword Association, the Murphy Family, the Voiken Family and many other



smaller individuals organizations through the Open Consortium and the Creation Association.

Naturally, there was also his large and expansive customer base, one he was keen on expanding even further!

The power of the market did not just lie in being able to earn a lot of money by selling products.

What Ves as well was the influence and power he gained from building up a large following. His clan and mech company were still not too far away from small fry in the new frontier. The easiest way for them to become unassailable was by establishing a strong and vast network of interconnected interests!

He still had a long way to go before his network reached this point, but he had come one step closer to becoming a bulwark in the Red Ocean by roping in the Aduc Family.

Flush with this recent success and having obtained a lot of inspiration from observing the Old Lady's injured state, Ves became engrossed by all of the new possibilities he could explore.

Just the fact that he gained access to two brand-new spiritual attributes substantially widened the range of spiritual products he could make!

As an original source of both low-grade wood and low-grade earth spiritual energy, Ves already regarded the Old Lady as his latest spiritual livestock!

However, compared to the value of a single special oak tree, the Aduc Family possessed an even greater treasure.

The best had yet to come!

Shortly after he concluded his second visit to the Green Sanctum, Matriarch Erex was finally ready to lead him to another chamber where the Aduc Family stored its second great treasure.

"We have never hid the Old Lady from the public." The matriarch spoke. "Though she is valuable, she is just a tree in the eyes of other people. She served as an excellent decoy for our second and more obscure heirloom. What I am about to show you is one of our greatest secrets. It is both the instigator of our family's exile from the Terran Confederation and also the reason why our terraforming services have earned a decent amount of renown in our line of business."

Ves became more fascinated by her explanation as they left the Green Sanctum far behind them and headed towards the stern of the Aduc Family's flagship.



Along the way, they passed through numerous biolabs, analysis departments, training halls, machine shops and other interesting facilities.

Though the Aduc Family wasn't as large and strong as the Larkinson Clan, their ability to transform lifeless planets that were inhospitable to human life into globes filled with green and life was absolutely amazing!

Ves and every other Larkinson had no idea where to begin if they ever wanted to do the same!

As the minutes passed by, Ves eventually noticed that they were heading awfully far away from the protected center of the Green Dream.

"Where are we heading to, matriarch?"

"The main engineering bay." The head of the Aduc Family replied. "We do not think it is wise to store two of our heirlooms in the same location. Since the Old Lady attracts so much attention, it is easier for our second heirloom to go unnoticed, especially when it is buried right underneath power reactors, an FTL drive and powerful forward thrusters."

"Ah, that does make it a good place to mask the presence of sensitive items."

All of the heat and energy emissions from this giant compartment could interfere with the functioning of all but the most powerful and advanced sensor systems!

The Aducs were probably not the first and last ones to use this basic trick to hide their treasures.

When they entered the engineering bay, Ves scanned the layout and noted that the positioning of all of the powerful systems and components did not obviously stand out. Nonetheless, he could still identify plenty of pockets of space where the Aducs could get away with hiding a sensitive object.

The matriarch led him to the side where they approached an empty area. She brought up her comm and pressed it onto a contact point.

Nothing appeared to have happened, but the woman looked expectant nonetheless.

"The deck plating before our feet has silently retracted while we waited." She explained. "What you see before you is a powerful physical projection to mask the change. Let us head downwards."

They both stepped onto the physical projection before the forces holding them aloft had disappeared.

Both descended down a tunnel and entered into a secret corridor that was deliberately squashed between a series of large power channels and tubes. The designer of this secret compartment even deformed the shape of all of these channels in order to open up a secret compartment that could not be found in any of the maps and blueprints of the Green Dream!

Ves could feel the powerful energies flowing just outside of his immediate surroundings. The Aducs constantly had to maintain a minimum threshold of power consumption in order to ensure that no sensors or scanners could detect this cavity!

The greater the amount of effort the Aduc Family put into hiding their second heirloom, the more he looked forward to getting introduced to it! He knew it was the right choice to extort this secret out of the Aducs!

The corridor wasn't long, but it was filled with all kinds of secret security measures such as turrets, gravity traps, crushers and other nasty surprises.

None of them posed a problem as Matriarch Erexí disarmed each of them through an unknown input method.

Once they reached the other side, they stood before a set of blast doors. Opening it up was much more complicated, but Ves didn't have to do anything but wait.

The surroundings soon began to rumble as the heavy blast doors slowly slid open, revealing a large and mostly empty metal chamber.

Ves briefly felt a faint pressure washing over his body. It was as if whatever was stored inside possessed a great magnitude!

He peered through the chamber which was not that brightly lit. The only feature of note was a pedestal made out of stone that stuck out of the middle.

Hovering just above this pedestal was a transparent cage that contained an object that instantly caused Ves to develop a lot of different associations!

"Is that...?!"

"Our heirloom is a scroll, yes." Matriarch Erexí said in a tone that made it sound as if this wasn't anything special. "We have owned it for centuries. We do not know how old it is, but its effect on us is so great that we have always tried our best to maintain its secrecy."

Ves was shocked by the possible origin and power of this scroll!

If this happened to be the mythical Earth Scroll, then how could a relic that was so powerful and sought after be hiding aboard a simple second-class capital terraforming ship?

The Big Two would have detected its presence somehow and snatched it a long time ago if it was real!

Besides, didn't he hear from a source that the Five Scrolls Compact still retained possession of both the Earth Scroll and the Water Scroll?

As the pair slowly approached the pedestal, Ves stared intensely at the browned and aged scroll.

It... did not exude the vibe of one of the great Sacred Scrolls that the Compact was so obsessed about.

A profound sense of disappointment ran throughout his body. He only maintained a faint hope that it may have been the real deal, but it was apparent that it was only a really old scroll.

"What is it, matriarch?"

The woman gazed reverently at the scroll that strangely did not contain any spirituality or spiritual energy.

"Our ancestors call it the Annals of Terra Vita. They obtained this great gift from a small and obscure cult that used to worship Old Earth but no longer exists as far as we know. The most remarkable aspect about the Annals is its text. We have tried our best to translate its contents over the centuries, and while we have not come close to deciphering its full and accurate meaning, what little we have learned has given us a method for us to become in tune with life and planets!"

If the so-called Annals of Terra Vita was the authentic Earth Scroll, then this mysterious cult would have never given it away to the Aduc Family as a gift!

Ves already ruled out the possibility that he was standing in front of a real Sacred Scroll. Even without the matriarch's explanation, he already felt it in his bones that the Aduc Family's second heirloom was not as grand, majestic and powerful as one of the five extraordinary relics that drove the course of human history.

A different possibility came to mind, though. He did not think it was a coincidence that the relic came in the form of a scroll.

Was it possible that it was a copy of the Earth Scroll?

The very notion of this possibility was enough to stop his heart!

## Chapter 4019 Dense Letters

As Matriarch Erexī Aduc briefly told the tale of how her ancestors obtained the Annals of Terra Vita.

Ves had plenty of questions about the origin and the history of this supposedly 'small' and 'obscure' Earth cult that was about to pass on a relic of this magnitude.

He was already convinced that this unknown Earth cult was related to the Five Scrolls Compact in some way. There were just too many coincidences and indirect relations to make it unlikely that the two had nothing to do with each other.

The Annals of Terra Vita most definitely had a relationship with the Earth Scroll. If not, then Ves was a mech pilot!

"The scroll itself is not that special." Matriarch Erexī admitted in a soft tone. "It is made out of relatively valuable but ultimately ordinary paper that has become increasingly more fragile over the years. We do not dare to touch it with our own hands anymore for fear of breaking it. We have tried our best to employ measures to protect and preserve the scroll, but we do not want to take any chances."

"I understand."

A real Sacred Scroll should never be so brittle! While it was true that the Metal Scroll had likely fractured into pieces during the Big Two's great rebellion against the Five Scrolls Compact, this was a conflict that likely involved god mechs, warships and a lot of powerful Compact sorcerers!

It was not impossible to imagine that a relic that was great enough that a mere fragment of it could spawn the Mech Designer System could break from all of the unleashed firepower!

Compared to such a powerful object, this sad excuse of a scroll that the Aducs had kept hidden for centuries was so much weaker that it would have instantly burned apart as soon as a laser beam got anywhere close!

Matriarch Erexī continued her explanation.

"What is special about this scroll is its contents, not its material. We call it the Annals of Terra Vita because as far as we can tell, its text describes the evolution of a planet that may have turned into Old Earth, or an idealized version of it. We cannot be too sure."

Ves raised a curious eyebrow. "You aren't sure? You studied it for centuries!"

"The contents of the scroll are much more special than you think, patriarch. Its text comes in no human language that we know of. They are similar to hieroglyphs but not

entirely the same. We have encountered many problems in our attempts to translate and interpret the meaning of this mysterious language. Our progress has been slow because we cannot utilize any form of electronics, computers and even biocomputers to record and analyze its contents."

"That... sounds strange. Can't you just take a picture with it using your implant or something?"

Matriarch Erexu grimaced. "The content of the Annals of Terra Vita is protected by security measures that we cannot even begin to understand. Our implants... malfunction and get scrambled whenever we make the attempt. Not even our attempts to reproduce the strange text has yielded any results. You will understand when you try to read its contents yourself. I advise you to put your implant on a lower setting to minimize the disruption or temporarily turn it dormant entirely in order to avoid a crushing headache."

This sounded more and more mysterious. Ves had never heard of such a remarkable system of copy protection.

"I believe it is better to show you rather than talk about it further." The woman finally said. "Brace yourself. First exposure to the Annals of Terra Vita will induce a substantial shock to your mind and body. Some of our weaker members have even been knocked unconscious because of their inability to handle the remarkable power contained within."

All of this made Ves more vigilant. He did not take her warnings lightly and already raised his mental and spiritual defenses.

Blinky had also gone on alert in his mind. His companion spirit was not only an energy converter, but also the most powerful guardian of his mind!

"Please proceed, matriarch. I am ready."

Erexu Aduc did not open the transparent cage to roll out the paper scroll with her hands. That was far too crude and could damage the aged relic.

Instead, she pressed her fingers against the surface of the pedestal and manipulated it in a special way so that an invisible forcefield gently rolled out the scroll so that it exposed its front side to Matriarch Erexu and Patriarch Ves.

The former did not exhibit any strong reactions when she gazed upon the mysterious text of the Annals of Terra Vita. Her spirit only briefly fluctuated before she was able to get a handle on herself.

Ves on the other hand felt as if a giant metal fist had just punched his mind!

He could not properly describe the outpouring of power that slammed into his system, only that it was weighty and a completely new experience to him. He fully understood why the matriarch spoke with such caution about what might happen!

Fortunately, the initial shock did not last too long. The pressure from the scroll had dropped to the point where Ves could slowly regain his wits. He shook his head and did his best to regain clarity, but the buzz in his brain made it difficult for him to recover as fast as he wished.

"It helps for you to recover if you don't stare directly into the scroll. I suggest you spend a few minutes staring right next to it so that you can recover and acclimate to the power of the Annals. Also, don't forget to turn off your cranial implant or else your headache will only grow worse."

He did as she suggested and found that this was indeed a good way to get a handle on himself.

Switching off his Archimedes Rubal made the biggest difference to him. As soon as he temporarily turned his cranial implant offline, it was as if his head was doused with refreshingly cool water.

Ves did not find his current state to be too pleasant, though. He had grown so accustomed to the benefits of possessing a partially digitized mind that he felt his thinking had degraded after losing access to his implant's many convenient functions.

He wondered how a simple paper scroll could achieve this effect. He was incredibly curious to start reading the scroll, but he felt he still needed time to adjust before he properly gazed at its contents.

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Keeping Matriarch Erexia Aduc's words in mind, Ves kept the scroll in his peripheral vision for now. He found that while the Annals of Terra Vita still exerted a strange pressure on him, it was not as strong and violent as it could be. He had the feeling that keeping the relic in his vision in this manner only partially put him in the same phase of its contents.

After three minutes had passed, Ves felt his mind had recovered sufficiently to observe the scroll properly. When he shifted his eyes, he became dazzled by strange words and a potent amount of energy locked within.

The unknown black 'letters', if he could even call it that, were seemingly painted by a calligraphy brush of sorts. Ves could feel the flow of every brush stroke as the unknown letters densely packed into the surface of the scroll as if it was trying to cram as much information onto the surface as possible!

There was no distinct formatting or structure to the contents of the Annals. It just appeared as a giant wall of text that was made up of hand-painted letters whose meaning escaped him. They were completely unlike any human or alien letters that he had come across in his life. He fully believed the Aduc Matriarch when she claimed that they had failed to decipher it even after studying it for centuries.

Although the shape and meaning of the letters completely passed him by, there was more to them than was apparent on the surface.

The letters on the scroll were charged with spiritual energy.

Pure, concentrated spiritual energy was locked within each letter and stroke. Whether it was due to the use of a special ink or through a wondrous feat of spiritual engineering, whoever made this scroll managed to infuse every letter with rich and powerful earth-attributed spiritual energy!

As Ves ignored the letters on the surface and used his spiritual senses to examine the locked spiritual energy more directly, he briefly gained a faint impression of Old Earth in the various stages of its evolution.

This hallucination only lasted for a short time. As Ves tried his best to understand the meaning of the text, he found that he was unable to get a handle on it. Whoever made this scroll possessed such exquisite control and technique that each letter was practically an advanced product of spiritual engineering!

It was as if each letter contained a complete book or comprehensive software program!

With thousands of letters on this single page alone, that meant that this paper scroll might contain an entire library's worth of data or instructions!

Unfortunately, none of his attempts to interpret the scroll succeeded. His perceptive abilities allowed him to observe the surface of these dense spiritual letters, but that didn't mean he could understand their actual meaning or significance.

It was just like looking at the interior of an FTL drive! Even if he knew what the most basic parts could do, that was hardly enough for him to understand the full working principles of this complicated device!

The same went for this instance. His foundation in spiritual engineering was way too shallow for him to appreciate what this scroll portrayed.

"There is another hindrance."

Whenever Ves tried to push his perception past the surface of the tiny spiritual constructs, he encountered a lot of resistance and rejection.



Even though the spiritual letters weren't alive, he felt that they were autonomous enough to repel those who were not authorized to read and understand their meaning.

Ves frowned. When he briefly turned his gaze to Matriarch Erex, he noticed that she faced a lot less hindrances in her own attempts to interpret the letters.

Her eyes almost glowed as she ritually read the letters in her head.

What was amazing about this was that the letters actually responded to her reading! Ves could track her progress by the way her spirituality became more activate and how each letter briefly spiked their energies in sequence!

"This..."

Ves grew dismayed. Even though he only came into contact with the Annals of Terra Vita for a brief amount of time, he figured out that it was impossible for him to take a single image capture of it and read its contents back home in leisure.

First, any device that attempted to make a copy of its contents would fail.

Second, even if he somehow managed to obtain a copy of its letters and ink strokes, it was completely useless if the reproduction did not copy the spiritual letters as well!

Third, if by any chance he obtained the scroll or a faithful reproduction of it, the security measures of the letters were so advanced that Ves wouldn't be able to decipher them without breaking them entirely!

He did not think it was a challenge for him to break upon the spiritual letters by force. He could use his own energy or one of his allied spirits to exert their own power onto the mysterious scroll.

He could also send out Blinky to directly drain and devour the energy that kept these spiritual constructs alive.

Yet if he did so, he would most definitely lose what made them special! The losses would far outweigh the gains as he could already turn to the Old Lady if he wanted to obtain a dose of earth-attributed spiritual energy.

"Why can't I read or interpret this scroll?" Ves asked the matriarch directly. "Why are you able to harmonize with its contents?"

"Only the members of our bloodline have earned the right to read Annals of Terra Vita." She answered as if she was already prepared for it. "We have cautiously invited others to read the scroll in the past, but we have found that no matter how similar they are to us, being married into our family is not enough. The cult who has gifted us this precious scroll has made sure that it is of no use to anyone else."

This explained why the MTA likely left the Annals of Terra Vita in the possession of the Aduc Family.

Ves would have been tempted to snatch it as well if this security measure wasn't in place!

#### Chapter 4020 Authentic Disguise

This Annals of Terra Vita was odd.

Ves had a feeling as if he had come into contact with a relic that was related to an old but storied part of human society.

Whether the maker of this scroll was part of the Five Scrolls Compact remained to be seen.

All he could ascertain was that if the maker wasn't a member of this dreaded organization, then he or she was definitely related to it in a fashion!

Ves didn't have enough information to ascertain whether the Earth cult was a direct offshoot of the Five Scrolls Compact or a dissident organization that had fallen out with its mother organization.

He was leaning towards the latter because it probably wouldn't have been so casual about handing out scrolls like these if it was actually affiliated with the Compact!

Still, the maker of the scroll was not a lightweight in terms of spiritual engineering. The sophistication of each spiritual letter was comparable to that of the Grand Dynamo!

The two even possessed a lot of similar elements if he remembered the Grand Dynamo right. They were made out of the same spiritual tech base, which further reinforced his suspicions concerning the scroll's relation to the Five Scrolls Compact.

As Ves continued to speculate about the origins and background of this paper scroll, Matriarch Erexu finally pulled herself away from the text and provided additional clarification.

"It is pointless for you to read the Annals of Terra Vita. You do not share the same ideology and philosophy as ours. Even if you do, you do not possess our bloodline and are not a part of our family, so the scroll will never share its secrets to outsiders. You are welcome to try and see if you can unlock its secrets, but our past experiences have taught us that it is futile.

The matriarch had reason to feel confident. She probably banked on the scroll's advanced security measures to keep its secrets in her family's hands.

Ves frowned as he tried to figure out how he could possibly make any gains from this instance.

The more he studied the spiritually-charged letters, the more they strained his mind.

It was as if he was looking into a huge swarm of bees. Trying to find a coherent meaning in the pattern of movements was impossible to him. Just looking at this swarm for an extended time made him dizzy!

He turned and studied Matriarch Erexia Aduc once again.

From a spiritual standpoint, her spiritual development was greater and more advanced than that of her peers. It was probably one of the reasons why she had become the leader of the Aduc Family.

If her notable spiritual development was related to the Annals of Terra Vita, then it was almost certain that this was the key to reading the spiritual letters!

Ves became a bit more thoughtful as he studied the matriarch's condition when she went back to reading the text.

The way in which her spirit reacted to the letters and vice versa reminded him of encryption and other electronic security systems.

"Perhaps... the bloodline is not the key... or at least not the only decisive factor..."

What if the decisive factor was his spiritual energy attribute?

Ves possessed a domain that was strongly aligned to metal and life. Though he possessed other attributes just like any other complex sentient life form, they were much weaker and less prominent.

He recalled the way that the Old Lady's earth energy managed to resist death energy a lot better than wood or life energy.

Attributes mattered. Now that he paid attention to this variable, he felt as if he cleared a bit of the mystique of the paper scroll.

Ves thought back on what Matriarch Erexia Aduc had said about the history of this heirloom. Though she hadn't said much about it, the cult that supposedly produced the Annals sounded like a quirky group that worshiped Old Earth as if the planet was the mother of both life and the human race.

If this was the essence of the cult's beliefs, then the scrolls that it made and distributed to its supporters and allies should also share the same beliefs!

He widened his eyes as he made an important realization.

If the scroll indeed only reacted to those who venerated the cradle of humanity, then it had effectively played a powerful filtering and sorting role to the Aduc Family!

Only a minority of the Aducs had fully activated their spiritualities and developed wood, life and earth attributes.

Previously, he thought that these people tended to be the smarter and more talented members of the Aduc Family as most of them were higher-ranked than the rest.

This might not necessarily be wrong, but their powerful spiritual development also led him to believe that the Aduc Family essentially chose their leaders and entrusted greater authority to those who reacted the best to the Annals of Terra Vita!

The result of establishing this mechanism was that the Aduc Family would always be ruled over by leaders that deified Old Earth!

Ves even suspected that the maker of the scroll deliberately designed this mechanism to achieve this result. This way, the Earth cult would be assured that the Aduc Family would always be a supporter to its cause!

In any case, the same measures that ensured the Aducs would remain respectful towards Old Earth also hindered people like Ves from reading this damned scroll!

"Matriarch, what does this scroll actually say? Is it more than just a factual recounting of the evolution of Old Earth?"

"As far as we know, the scroll is that and more." Erex slowly answered as she took a brief break from reading a bunch of spiritually-charged letters. "The contents may sound dry, but there are hidden meanings and lessons in what we read. It is what makes the process of reading the scroll so profound and eye-opening. Even if I have read this scroll many times, I can still uncover a new meaning or derive a new lesson from the letters."

"Can you provide any details or examples of this?" Ves curiously asked.

"No."

"No...?"

"I am unable to oblige you, Patriarch Ves. As soon as we read and develop our own understanding of the contexts of this scroll, it becomes locked to the point where we cannot divulge anything we know."

"How convenient."

Whoever made the scroll sure knew how to protect his intellectual property!

There were so many mechanisms that prevented people like Ves from stealing the contents of this damned scroll that it was bound to contain valuable knowledge!

The harder the scroll tried to protect its information, the more Ves wanted to crack it open!

The question was how he could accomplish this goal.

After observing Matriarch Erexi once again, he suddenly came up with a bright idea.

He subtly roused Blinky and commanded his cat to perform an interesting experiment.

Mrow...

The companion spirit spat out the small samples of spiritual energy that it had 'borrowed' from the Old Lady.

Her state might not be good at the moment, but Blinky only took out a small bite from her injured form. The old tree should still be able to hang on in the short term!

With the help of Blinky, Ves temporarily took hold of the Old Lady's energy and tried to cover it over himself like a shell or a mask.

His vibe and demeanor subtly changed as he put on a coat that was primarily made out of earth energy.

Even Matriarch Erexi noticed a few traces. She looked at Ves in confusion.

Ves didn't pay attention to how the matriarch regarded him. He only had eyes for the Annals of Terra Vita.

His lips curled.

It was working!

The earth, life and wood energy that he had adopted as a disguise successfully produced a sympathetic reaction from the Annals of Terra Vita!

Apparently, its security measures worked similar to a security software program that wasn't governed by a clever AI!

The spiritual constructs weren't alive in the truest sense and were unable to act outside of their instructions.

In other words, they only operated according to the instructions programmed by their maker.

The creator of this scroll probably never imagined that a freak like Ves would appear who could fake his affinity for earth!

It could also be that the Aduc Matriarch wasn't entirely sincere about the origins of the scroll. There was a distinct possibility that it was never supposed to be the exclusive heirloom of the Aduc Family.

As long as any sincere worshiper of Old Earth passed the test, the scroll should be willing to reveal its secrets to that individual!

Now, Ves already noticed that the scroll produced a lot less resistance towards his attempt to read its letters.

The pressure was not as great and he started to feel as if the scroll was beginning to welcome his gaze.

"Let's see if this works this time."

The spiritual letter still resisted his probing. He felt as if he managed to get past the front gate of an office building but got no further than the foyer.

The damn receptionist was sneering at Ves as if he was a filthy peasant!

Even if Ves tried to do his best to pretend he belonged inside the structure, his affinity for earth was still too shabby to gain the spiritual letter's approval!

"Damnit, this isn't working."

His disguise was too flawed. It didn't matter how much earth, life and wood energy he gathered. It wasn't doing anything and it didn't convey anything except the bare minimum. Even if he had more, he had a feeling that he still wouldn't be able to pass the spiritual letter's test!

The best and most straightforward way to get past this hurdle was to play by its rules.

This was impossible for Ves because he already fixed his domain.

"Wait. There's another way."

What if... he created a spiritual entity that not only possessed the right mix of spiritual attributes, but also possessed the sincerest possible respect towards Old Earth?

His eyes lit up! This was a fantastic idea!

Humans were always more complex and were also spiritually deficient.

If he created a powerful new spiritual product based on the Old Lady, he could borrow her identity and fool the scroll's security measures!

The new design spirit he had in mind would be anything but a fake. She would truly be sincere about respecting Old Earth!

He already intended for the new and improved version of the Old Lady to retain her strong association to humanity's home planet, but now that he came across the Annals of Terra Vita, he intended to supercharge this connection!

"Hehehehe..."

Now that he formed a solid plan that had a high chance of getting past this barrier, he no longer pushed so hard to decipher the spiritual letters.

Instead, he used the remaining duration of this session to speculate what secrets this mysterious scroll held. The fact that it was made by a skilled spiritual sorcerer or engineer built up his hopes. There was no way such a powerful figure would waste his time on setting up all of these exhaustive security measures just to hide the recipes of his favorite meals!

Would Ves be able to access the library of the cult that produced the Annals? Would he gain access to secret records that detailed the history of the Five Scrolls Compact?

Perhaps the Annals might hold a huge spiritual treasure that was just as powerful and useful as the Grand Dynamo if not more!

When Matriarch Erexia Aduc finally reached her limits, she no longer forced herself to interpret the letters any further. The scroll slowly rolled up again and retracted every trace of remarkable energy, causing it to assume the guise of an ordinary museum object.

"Are you satisfied?"

"Not quite. I haven't properly prepared for this visit. Would you mind if I examine the Annals again a few days later?"

"Can we stop you if you insist?"

Ves wordlessly smiled.