

Mech 4031

Chapter 4031 Post-Taboo Society

What would a post-taboo on warships era look like?

Ves could hardly imagine the full changes to human society if ordinary people finally regained the chance to command their own warships again!

The darkness in humanity knew no bounds. As soon as a lot more people gained access to warships again, there were bound to be people who abused them against other humans! This was practically guaranteed to occur no matter how many restrictions the Big Two imposed on their users!

Perhaps this was another reason why much of the talk about this drastic change of policy was limited to the Red Ocean.

Not only was the population of humans much smaller in the colonies, but if anything ruinous occurred, only the crazy kids who took the initiative to travel to the wild frontier suffered the brunt of the damage!

The true core of human civilization that was based in the Milky Way Galaxy would remain untouched and unharmed!

Ves grimaced when he made this realization.

Was the Red Ocean nothing but a dwarf galaxy-sized experimental chamber to the Big Two?

His impression of the new frontier as a giant social experiment had grown stronger today!

All of the greedy and ambitious pioneers who poured into the Red Ocean ignorantly thought that the Big Two granted them a chance to found their own states in virgin territory.

What these gullible and ill-informed fools didn't realize was that they had all signed up to become the Big Two's test subjects as soon as they passed through the greater beyonder gate!

What made Ves extremely dissatisfied about this was that he was one of those gullible and ill-informed fools!

Still, even if he knew about this beforehand, he still would have chosen to head to the Red Ocean. The Milky Way was too dangerous for him and the possibility of getting sniffed out by the Five Scrolls Compact was simply too great.

The intensity of the Nyxian War already showed him that the Compact was still too powerful for Ves to resist. Running away to the Red Ocean where the cultists did not possess a strong foundation was by far the best choice that he could make.

He just wished he was better informed at the time so that he possessed a better realization of what kind of trial ground he was jumping into. It took talking to an old fogey for Ves to obtain the information he needed.

"Do you know why I chose Professor Taigen Voiken to lead my family's expedition to the Red Ocean?" Master Barnard suddenly asked.

"I heard from Sara and Dulo Voiken that he is among the younger and more flexible-minded Seniors in your family." Ves answered. "He sounds like a fine enough fellow to lead your conservative family's detachment into a region that is anything but familiar."

The Master slowly nodded. "That is part of the reason why I am optimistic about his current role. However, the driving reason why I sent him over is because his work and specialty is better adapted to the changes that might sweep the Red Ocean in the near future."

"What do you mean?"

"The Red Ocean is not only a playground for the CFA. It is also a testing site for the MTA. Just as the fleeters intend to see how humanity will adapt to the reintroduction of warships, the mechers are curious to see how the relationship between humans and mechs will change after the return of humanity's most tyrannical war assets."

Ves quickly understood what the Master was alluding to. Professor Taigen Voiken did not possess a particularly impressive record of designing combat mechs built for warfare.

This was because the Senior pretty much dedicated nearly his entire career to designing mechs for law enforcement agencies!

While he did not solely design mechs that primarily engaged their targets with non-lethal means, this was what he excelled at the most.

Ves could respect a mech designer who wanted to develop better and stronger law enforcement mechs. It was too easy to make machines of this size and scale as destructive as possible, but it was a lot harder to go the other way and minimize the amount of collateral damage they inflicted on the environment!

This was also why he did not discount the value of Professor Taigen's contribution to the Pacifier Project. The truth was that Ves had no serious clue on how to design a mech that could safely and reliably perform peacekeeping duties in a densely populated urban settlement.

He thought back on Master Barnard's original question.

Out of all of the possible mech types that could remain relevant in a post-taboo era, peacekeeping mechs probably ranked close to the top!

Ves became a lot more interested and invested in the Pacifier Project all of a sudden. This was not just an easy opportunity to earn a lot of money from Voiken Industries, but it was also a form of insurance that could guarantee that the Larkinson Clan wouldn't suddenly become broke once mechs fell out of favor in human society!

His eyes lit up. "There are still numerous roles and responsibilities that only mechs can fulfill. There are also other roles where mechs can still be more effective than warships. Peacekeeping duty is a typical case where warships are highly inappropriate!"

The typical assets utilized by law enforcement agencies consist of combat armor, shuttles and mechs.

If there was any incident that required the power of warships to resolve, then this was no longer a problem for a Planetary Guard organization.

Instead, it became the problem of the state military!

"After over four centuries of rebuilding, there are those in power that think that humanity is finally ready to return to a reality where we must learn to live alongside warships." Master Barnard said in a tired voice. "If such a scenario comes to pass, then mech designers such as you and I must also learn to adapt our business and our products to the changing demands of our consumers. Those of us who fail to complete this transition successfully will soon run out of business."

Ves frowned deeper. "This is going to be a bloodbath. There are lots of mech designers that have developed way too many products that are perfectly fine when deployed against other mech forces but will probably collapse at the first blow when confronted by a single warship. I'm afraid that the golden age of mechs will come to an end if the fleeters have their way."

The reintroduction of warships posed a near-existential threat to the mech industry! Ves could already predict that the bottom half of the mech industry that only managed to eke out a marginal existence would disappear as demand drastically fell while supply was still too great.

Even those who have managed to achieve more success compared to their peers would also fall under hard times after this shift took place.

It was undeniable that warships would take over much of the business that mechs previously monopolized because people simply couldn't get anything better!

"The reality is that the mech industry has always operated around a protected mech market." Barnard plainly told Ves. "It is already a great kindness to mech designers such as ourselves that our greatest form of competition has never been allowed to sell warships to the same consumers as ours. While I prefer that this situation is allowed to continue, we must all be ready to rethink our work if warships truly become ubiquitous again."

The Master's unspoken message was that it was far better to do this rethinking process ahead of time rather than remain completely unprepared when this pivotal moment finally arrived!

Ves spoke a few more words with Master Barnard. Though the man's opinions and attitudes were rather stodgy, his heart was in the right place. The man did not want humanity to go back to the bad old days of bombarding each other's cities and planets from orbit.

"The MTA has been working against the clock to promote and accelerate the development of mechs." Master Barnard said. "The goal is to narrow the gap between mechs and warships as fast as possible. Unfortunately, it appears our grace period is about to run out. No matter what changes may occur in the future, we must do our best to persist and finish what our mech industry has started. Both the older and younger generations of mech designers must work together to solve this existential problem."

"Shouldn't you be looking to the Star Designers to pull us out of this predicament? They're the best mech designers we have. I'm sure the Polymath already prepared a thousand solutions to this exact scenario."

Master Barnard shook his head. "To a Journeyman such as yourself, a Star Designer may seem omnipotent to you. They are indeed highly capable but they cannot solve every problem. There are too few of them and their methods and techniques are not all-encompassing enough to contain the threat of warships. What our industry and community have been doing for some time is to pin our hopes on emerging mech designers whose specialties are powerful and innovative enough to give our industry a chance to compete against warships, either through conventional or other solutions."

Ves widened his eyes. He already figured out that the MTA had high hopes for him in the future, but now he understood the greater context behind the Association's investment in him and other promising talents.

Jovy Armalon was in the same boat as him now that he thought about it. The reason why the MTA invested so much into Jovy's development was because his probability manipulation specialty could help mechs gain more combat effectiveness relative to warships!

This was the true meaning why both of them had been elevated into tier 6 galactic citizenship despite their short careers!

Ves and Master Barnard exchanged a few more words with each other, but the conversation slowly wound down as the latter no longer felt the need to share anymore hints about the future.

What Ves had already heard and deduced from Barnard's helpful ramblings was already enough.

Now that Ves obtained enough forewarning, he could push his men to make preparations in advance.

No matter whether the scenario would come to pass or not, Ves was not naive to think that the CFA would give up if its proposal eventually got shot down this time.

By the time both sides were ready to end the lengthy call, Ves felt a lot better about his upcoming partnership with the Voikens.

Though they would never fully align with each other on every matter, Ves at least recognized that he had enough common ground with Master Barnard Voiken to welcome the opportunity to befriend and work together with his family.

"If there is ever a point in the future where you are in the position to assist my descendants in the Red Ocean from a major threat, I would appreciate it if you take action."

Ves looked a bit uncomfortable at this final request. "The nature of our agreement only covers business obligations. It does not oblige either of us to extend any military aid."

"I am aware of that, but not every relationship has to be limited to the terms of an explicit contract, Mr. Larkinson. I may not be able to offer you much when I am still residing on this end of the greater beyonder gate, but I can still repay the debt that we owe to you in many ways. My foundation in my home star sector and my home galaxy is strong. If you are ever in need of a good and service that can only be obtained in the Milky Way, then I will see what I can do to meet your request."

"Can you get your hands on a naturally grown plant or plant seed from Old Earth and ship it over to my clan?" Ves spontaneously asked.

The Master Mech Designer's expression darkened.

"You would need to put us in great debt for us to consider this means of repayment."

Well, it was worth a try.

Chapter 4032 The Right Identity

After Ves concluded his insightful and illuminating discussion with Master Barnard Voiken, the negotiations between their respective organizations finished quickly.

The leaders of both the Larkinson Clan and the Voiken Family both liked each other. This was enough of a reason to cement the deal.

Given how Ves and Master Barnard saw a lot of advantages in cooperating with each other over longer periods of time, the negotiation teams no longer quibbled as much over the fine print of the contract.

As long as the negotiators from both sides wanted to complete the agreement as fast as possible, it did not take a lot of time before they concluded their work!

It was quite impressive for Ves to see a copy of the finished document before his desk only a day after his talk with Master Barnard.

The full contract largely fell in line with his demands and expectations. According to his advisors, there weren't any traps that he should be worried about. The Voiken Family had shown their sincerity and earnestness in many ways, not even hesitating to paint itself as the weaker side in the negotiation rounds.

By the time that Ves and Master Barnard Voiken officially signed the legally-binding document during a formal virtual conference meeting, the Larkinson Clan gained another business partner!

"How do you feel about your old family and relatives reconnecting to the clan that you have joined?" Ves asked the Voiken siblings shortly after the ceremony.

The two formally-dressed Journeymen looked ambivalent, to say the least. They neither celebrated this partnership nor condemned it from what it appeared.

"We still consider ourselves as Larkinsons." Dulo Voiken spoke up first. "We are thankful for our family for bringing us up and allowing us to become good in the profession that we have always yearned for, but in the short time we have been in your clan, we have improved so much and gained so many benefits that we can never imagine going back."

Sara nodded in agreement. "Our former patriarch is a great mech designer and leader in his own way, but the family that he has built is not a good home for everyone. We much prefer to work for the Larkinson Clan. It is here that we can be entrusted with major responsibilities right away and receive plenty of room for us to realize our own visions without too many constraints on our projects."

This was all true, but this was mainly because Ves was unable and unwilling to hire Seniors and Masters who should really be leading these kinds of design projects.

It was only in a new and developing organization that young and less experienced mech designers such as Sara and Dulo Voiken were able to take charge of major design projects, ones that had a real impact on the clan's military strength or commercial success!

Ves raised his arm and patted both Sara and Dulo on their shoulders. "I'm happy to hear that. I anticipate that our clan will gradually develop a closer bond with the Voikens in the Red Ocean. While I don't expect you to cut off contact entirely with your old relatives, I hope that you will always remember the identity that you have currently assumed."

"That goes without saying, sir."

There was no reason for Ves to worry about the divided loyalties of any of his men. They had all assimilated smoothly into the Larkinson Clan. The treatment they received after joining up was so good that there was little reason for them to look back or feel any nostalgia about their past situations.

He briefly quizzed the Voikens on the brief amount of progress they made on their design projects before waving them away.

Now that the Larkinson Clan and the Voiken Family signed a business agreement, Ves was able to cross another item on his lengthy to-do list.

There were not a lot of immediate priorities left before he could fully devote the following months of his life to completing his design projects.

He slowly smirked. "Enough time has passed for the Aducs to get accustomed to living alongside Gaia."

The powerful ancestral spirit should have already gotten used to its new life. He didn't need Gaia to possess full mastery over all of her powers and abilities. He just wanted her to possess enough of a handle of herself to cooperate with him on his next gambit.

He called ahead to the Aduc Family before heading over to his familiar shuttle to transit over to the Green Dream again.

Given the sensitive nature of the Aduc Family's second and far more secret heirloom, Ves did not bring along his daughter or any of his cats this time.

Matriarch Erexia Aduc enthusiastically greeted him as soon as he stepped out of his shuttle.

"Welcome back to our humble flagship, patriarch Ves. We will always open our doors to you. Do you wish to enter the Green Sanctum and visit the Mother of Earth in person?"

Ves shook his head. "No need. I have my own ways of contacting Gaia. I am on a tight schedule. I just want to pay a brief visit to you-know-what."

"I understand. This way, please."

In the interest of saving time, they boarded a floater platform and zipped through the hallways of the Aduc Family's capital ship until they approached the main engineering bay.

Ves went through all of the mandatory security checks and waited for the Aduc Matriarch to lead him through the familiar secret route before arriving in front of a familiar chamber.

The Annals of Terra Vita looked as aged and fragile as ever. Seeing it once again made Ves feel a sense of anticipation.

He had thought a lot about his first encounter with this old scroll when he returned back to his own fleet.

He also did a lot of research in the background of Old Earth and the people that worshiped the cradle of humanity.

It turned out that there were a lot of faiths centered around Old Earth throughout human space. The planet had gained such a mythical status in society that those who were born tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands of light-years away developed highly idealistic notions about the root of humanity.

Ves grew speechless when he got introduced all of these cults.

The Aduc's were tame compared to the crazies that worshiped Old Earth as a literal god!

All he could say about it was that there were many people that were desperate to believe in something greater and were capable of latching onto anything to satisfy their spiritual needs.

It was a bit unfortunate that Ves had come no closer to finding out the origin of the Annals of Terra Vita. There were no existing mentions of this scripture or whoever could have possibly made it, thereby ending his search fairly quickly.

Whether the Annals of Terra Vita was related to the one and only Earth Scroll was still unclear, but Ves hoped he could find out the truth today.

He did not bother to reach out to the Annals by his own power or that of Blinky. Neither of them possessed the right 'identity' to pass through the security mechanisms that

prevented him from grasping the secrets of the spiritual letters imprinted on the surface of the scroll.

Gaia should be able to pass through this hurdle, though.

He turned to Matriarch Erex. "Can you roll out the scroll for me again? I want to try out a potential method for me to read and understand your relic."

Erex did not show as much concern as the previous time. She simply nodded and manipulated the pedestal to make the Annals available for his perusal.

While the scroll was being readied, Ves brought out a small wooden statuette from one of his uniform pockets.

It was a fairly accurate representation of Gaia as he envisioned her, though there were a few deviations.

The reason why it was flawed was because this was the first time he created a totem using wood.

He slightly underestimated how difficult it was to work with this material and did not possess a great grasp with the tools used to work with wood.

The result was far from a masterwork, but that didn't bother Ves that much. What mattered was the intent and the small spiritual foundation of his finished work.

Surprisingly enough, despite the relatively ordinary wood species that he had chosen to make his statuette out of, the spiritual foundation of his creation was considerably stronger and more solid than he expected.

Based on his recently expanded theoretical framework, he could come up with two possible reasons why this was the case.

First, organic materials were much more compatible with life, so it should not be a surprise that a totem made out of wood worked better with his design philosophy.

Second, Gaia's spiritual attributes were especially compatible with plant organisms, particularly trees.

As a spiritual product made from the remains of the Old Lady, Gaia definitely possessed an amazing affinity and closeness to trees!

In any case, the small totem was more than powerful enough to serve as a relay and a medium for Ves to channel his new spiritual product.

"Gaia." He softly whispered. "Can you help me out and allow me to borrow your presence for a moment?"

"..."

The powerful new design spirit was not immediately receptive towards his request. Ves grimaced a bit.

Gaia had grown too powerful too quickly. Though she already developed close bonds with the Aducs, her respect towards her creator was less than ideal.

"C'mon, Gaia. Let me borrow your power for a few minutes. I can't promise that I will immediately design a mech in your name, but I shall definitely work on it when the next design round comes along!"

He finally felt a sense of acquiescence from the powerful spirit.

Everything was easy after that. He opened his mind and consciously tried to introduce Gaia into his own mind. This was not an easy process to pull off with a powerful spiritual entity that wasn't as close to him as his other design spirits.

Nonetheless, this wasn't the first time that Ves performed this little trick. He soon succeeded in completing the first step as he felt much closer and more aligned to Gaia than a moment before!

"Patriarch Ves!" Erex Aduc gasped as she saw and felt the touch of Gaia on him. "You..."

At this time, Ves truly looked as if he had become the Avatar of the Mother of Earth and the Origin of Life!

To the matriarch who had never been exposed to much of the Larkinson Clan's spiritual shenanigans, Ves looked positively divine at the moment!

It was as if Old Earth had suddenly shrunk down and took on the form of a blessed human!

Ves had no time to entertain the Aduc Matriarch's delusions. He merely waved her aside and approached the pedestal that held the transparent cage that held and protected the Annals of Terra Vita.

Compared to the first time he observed the scroll in this state, the fragile relic looked completely differently in his Gaia-tinted eyes!

The aged paper scroll was positively overflowing with earth energy!

There was so much power contained in the spiritual letters as well as the unassuming paper material that Ves felt as if Gaia had suddenly lifted a veil over his head!

"There is definitely a greater secret behind this scroll!" He concluded.

The Aduc Family's relic was far more special and remarkable than he initially expected. Ves grew even more convinced that an item of this power and complexity must absolutely possess a great secret! It was absolutely not a slightly special gift that the Aducs had always assumed!

The more Ves observed the Annals of Terra Vita through Gaia's senses, the more he felt drawn to it. The scroll was calling to him somehow.

Not only that, but he also felt that the scroll was eager to pass on its contents to Ves or more precisely the design spirit he was channeling!

Just as Ves was about to request Matriarch Erexia to pull the scroll out of its protective cage, Gaia suddenly roiled in his mind and acted on her own initiative!

"Wait! What the hell are you doing?! Hey, stop that!"

His new spiritual product had become so attracted by the calling of the Annals of Terra Vita that she could not resist the impulse to respond!

As soon as her spiritual presence came into contact with the mysterious scroll, the entire secret chamber flashed in earthen light!

Chapter 4033 The Earth Shrine

The Ruined Temple was what everyone called it these days. Everyone who knew the truth, at least.

Once a glorious bastion of the servants of the immortal gods, the former Great Temple had clearly seen better days.

The reason for that was because a group of ambitious and daring upstarts not only had the temerity to rebel against the Five Scrolls Compact, but actually succeeded in their attempts to break away!

Ordinarily, the powerful rebel strike forces should have never been able to reach the Great Temple as it was known at the time.

This was because this sanctified domain was located in a pocket space that was nigh-inaccessible to anyone.

The only keyholders who could gain passage were those that had been granted the authority through the Sacred Scrolls.

For a long time, the Compact saw nothing wrong with this arrangement. Its leaders had become increasingly more powerful as humanity expanded during the heydays of the Age of Conquest.

Yet all of that power and success also breed an enormous amount of arrogance.

In their conceit and belief in their mission, the Compact had begun to prepare for a grand ritual that would have a profound effect on the future of the human race.

Not everyone was willing to see this devastating turning point come to pass.

So the opponents of the Compact decided to put an end to the grand ritual.

Upon that fateful day, the Great Temple experienced its first and most destructive intrusion of its history!

"Our greatest enemy turned out to be the deluded fools from within."

Aided by a pair of high-ranked insiders who were one of the few who possessed the keys to the gate, the precursors of the Common Fleet Alliance and the Mech Trade Association barged into the mysterious pocket space with great bombast!

Before the defenders and powerhouses of the Great Temple could regain their composure, the most powerful war weapons of the rebel strike forces had already struck!

Within seconds, the pre-planned volley fire quickly overwhelmed defensive arrays, broke through physical barriers and collapsed entire structures that were old beyond belief!

Fire, energy and projectiles filled the pocket space as the invaders already struck heavy blows against the enemies that still thought of themselves as all-powerful!

Though the counterattack from the Compact powerhouses struck the unwelcome intruders just as heavily, the latter had brought too many combat assets to the fight!

On this day, the Big Two broke the Five Scrolls Compact.

"The greater our pride, the harder our fall. We have yet to recover from the blow to both our headquarters and our hearts."

Though the ancient cult was too big and too powerful for the Big Two to annihilate in its entirety, there was no doubt that the Great Betrayal had broken its spine!

As the victorious rebels successfully took charge of human civilization and heralded the beginning of the Age of Mechs, the deposed rulers retracted much of their tentacles and licked their wounds in the monument to their hubris and utter failure.

Ever since the Compact ceded control of human civilization to those it once considered its subordinates, the Great Temple never regained its former glory.

In their shame and guilt, the survivors of the Great Betrayal vowed to never repair and restore the damage until they had retrieved and returned all five Sacred Scrolls to their rightful places!

Of course, even as they made this vow, the cultists weren't stupid enough to leave their defenses broken and in ruin.

"Arrogance is not an effective defense against cowards."

Having paid a heavy price for their hubris, the humbled survivors had left most of the damaged cosmetic facades alone but heavily rebuilt every defensive measure.

After centuries of diligent work and investment, the Ruined Temple was far more defensible than ever before!

Even if the Big Two managed to circumvent the vastly-improved security measures that prevented another unauthorized intrusion, any massive warfleet would instantly be met with storms of fire and fury!

At this time, the Ruined Temple was in a fairly quiet state. Hardly any cultists flew around and most of the temple terrain was devoid of life and movement.

There was only a little bit more warmth and activity at the center of the fairyland pocket space.

Five grand and not-so-grand shrines dominated the most defensible area of the Ruined Temple. They were all placed along the points of a pentagram and hazy power filled the space in between.

In the glory days of the Five Scrolls Compact, the power and energy circulating through this space used to be much greater and much more impressive than anyone born after the start of the Age of Mechs could imagine!

It was a pity that multiple nodes no longer functioned properly, causing this powerful array to lose nearly its entire effect.

"The power we wielded in the seat of our holy domains was unsurpassed, especially when it was aimed against ourselves."

Due to the vow made by the Compact cultists, only a portion of the shrines still looked intact.

The Wood Shrine suffered the greatest damage by far. Nothing of the original structure was left. Only parts of its foundation became exposed. The rest of the site was dominated by a crater that was so large and all-encompassing that anyone could easily imagine that it had been struck by an explosion of unsurpassed power!

The Metal Shrine at least showed a semblance of its former appearance, but too many of its highly-reinforced walls and fixtures had been shattered due to heavy fighting.

The Fire Shrine was also badly damaged, but the intensity of the fighting that took place in this area was not as great.

In contrast to those places, the Earth Shrine and the Water Shrine still remained intact for the most part. Both maintained all of their structural integrity and only received minor to moderate cosmetic surface damage.

Evidently, the attackers did not have the time, opportunity or willingness to attack these important structures as well.

The result of this outcome was that the Compact still retained much of the heritage and power of two of its five elemental branches!

"The rebels spared us only because of our weakness, not because of our strength."

The Water Shrine wasn't doing so well these days. Sacred Speaker Daphania's infamous attempt to retrieve a trace of the Metal Scroll sparked the biggest defeat that the Compact had suffered since the Great Betrayal!

The loss of a Sacred Daughter and her crown inflicted a heavy blow to the Water Shrine.

In the chaos and anger that ensued, the Water Keepers unanimously decided to lash out, sparking a civilization-wide temper tantrum that became known as the Crown Uprising!

Once the core members of the Water Shrine had exposed and wasted the lives of many of their sleeper agents, they had retracted their wrath in order to decide who among them should succeed the former Sacred Daughter!

This was an event of heavy import and the competition for this coveted position was extreme. In order to prevent any outsiders from affecting this vital succession process, the Water Keepers chose to close the doors of the Water Shrine, thereby allowing them to decide on this matter behind closed doors.

"The Water Keepers have always been... the more volatile supplicants among our core members."

Every Keeper was a blessed individual who had won the approval of one of the Sacred Scrolls. The holy artifact had bestowed them with a portion of its authority, allowing them to evolve closer to godhood without the hindrance of their mortal limitations!

Of course, the authority given by the Sacred Scroll was not only limited, but also uneven. The Holy Son or Daughter was merely the Keeper that happened to hold the highest share of authority!

While the Water Shrine was undergoing a succession of changes, the Earth Temple that was next door was not as turbulent.

Throughout the Age of Mechs, the shrine and its Keepers had remained remarkably passive.

Though adherents of the Earth Scroll still engaged in their own activities, they had refused to act in a high profile manner since the Great Betrayal.

This suited the Compact fine. Both of the surviving Shrines had formed a new understanding and divided their responsibilities according to their inclinations and preferences.

Hot blood still ran through the veins of the Water Keepers. This made them much more suited to handle the external affairs of the Five Scrolls Compact. They handled matters such as infiltration, subversion and attacks.

The Earth Keepers were solid and less eager to move by nature. This made them more at home when handling the internal affairs of the Compact. They preferred to spend their efforts on bolstering their defenses and rooting out the persistent attempts by their enemies to infiltrate the Ruined Temple once again.

"Five is the holy number but two is more manageable."

Within the quiet, sanctified halls of the Earth Shrine, its Keepers and caretakers were either moving quietly, praying to the source of their authority or handling their more mundane responsibilities.

While there were plenty of personalities among them that were more than willing to radiate their power and suppress the lessers around them, none of these powerful and confident Keepers were willing to do so in this sacred structure.

"We are gods among men, but even we must bow our heads in front of a greater power!"

Every single member of the Five Scrolls Compact, from the lowest peripheral cultist to the most powerful Keepers, knew that they must always show sincere devotion and respect towards the relics that served as the root of their faith!

Within the largest, grandest and most heavily defended halls, the Earth Scroll quietly hovered above a grand marble-like pedestal.

The resplendence of the Sacred Scroll in its complete and untainted state could not be described.

The divine object was as large as half a mech in its current form. Earthen power constantly radiated from its white and unaging paper surface. A grand golden cylinder held and partially covered the immortal paper, much to protect it and to contain its great power.

Kneeling far below the tall and gigantic pedestal that enthroned one of the most precious artifacts in the Milky Way was a single figure.

A aged figure that had witnessed both the highest and lowest point of the history of the Five Scrolls Compact knelt in supplication and surrendered to the source of his authority.

Having lived beyond 600 standard summers and winters, the unmoving Son of Earth conveyed a great sense of weight and loss.

On one hand, the Holy Son of the Earth Scroll was one of the co-leaders of the Five Scrolls Compact. His influence was great and his voice could span the galaxy.

On the other hand, this ancient man had spent nearly his entire time after the Great Betrayal in penance for his failure to protect the Great Temple!

Though there were times and situations where he was obliged to handle his responsibilities elsewhere, he always returned to this sacred hall without fail in order to resume his punishment.

It was unknown how much time he spent on his knees. Over the years, there had been plenty of Earth Keepers who had attempted to persuade the Son of Earth that he had suffered enough.

He remained unmoving.

There were even Keepers who suggested that a failure was no longer the most suitable person to hold the greatest share of authority bestowed by the Earth Scroll.

The robed and bearded figure struck the dissidents down without mercy. Just because he desired to remain quiet and suffer through his penance did not mean he was any less of a Sacred Son!

There were times when the Sacred Son never moved from his place for several weeks and months!

At this time, the Son of Earth had remained still for three weeks and counting. Everyone in the Earth Shrine expected this to last for at least several more weeks as there was no pressing matter on the agenda.

Yet on this fateful day, the brown-robed figure kneeling in front of the giant pedestal shook before looking up at the giant immortal artifact floating at an impressive height.

The Earth Scroll was pulsing!

Pure, earthen energy rhythmically pulsed outwards as if it was a beacon that had just gone active!

The glowing golden eyes of the Son of Earth gazed with stupor before they widened in realization.

With the help of the impressive vested authority bestowed by the Sacred Scroll, the Son of Earth slowly understood the cause of this reaction.

His voice rang throughout the entire Earth Shrine.

"The Earth Scroll... is waking up. An immortal god... is reaching out to our Sacred Scroll!"

A second after he issued this massive announcement, every single Earth Keeper stopped what they were doing and raced towards the main hall as fast as possible!

Each of them previously thought that the Five Scrolls Compact had failed in its attempt to execute its divine mission.

Yet even when its attempt to complete its grand ritual had ended in flame and ruin, the Earth Scroll had suddenly reignited their hope.

The Son of Earth no longer surrounded himself with an air of defeat and penance.

As soon as the pivotal change occurred, he had regained all of his majesty and brilliance!

Hope shone through his powerful divinely-touched eyes as he rose to his feet while gripping his impressive-looking Golden Orb!

"My years of penance have not been in vain! Our immortal god has finally responded to my call!"

Every single Earth Keeper gazed just as eagerly at the active Earth Scroll as their leader!

"One of our immortal gods has finally descended upon our desolate and forsaken galaxy!"

Chapter 4034 The Cradle of Humanity

Earth. The mother planet. The cradle of humanity. The symbolic capital of one of the greatest human empires in history.

On the surface, there was nothing special about the third satellite of the Sol System.

Terrestrial globes like these were like a dime in a dozen in the Milky Way.

While there weren't many of them that happened to satisfy all of the harsh conditions to foster organic life, this still amounted to a huge number given that there were hundreds of billions of star systems in the galaxy!

From a galactic perspective, Earth really wasn't that special. Even the Red Ocean featured a lot of livable planets that played host to comparable plants and wildlife.

In fact, not only was Earth rather common as a life-bearing planet, it also ranked among the lowest of classes!

The home planets of the once-dominant Seven Apex Races were much more impressive in comparison!

Each of them were rife with an abundant quantity of medium to high-grade exotics. These powerful and in some cases unique materials not only transformed the environment of the planets they resided in, but directly affected the evolution of all of the life forms that grew up on their surfaces!

This was how individually powerful races such as the phase whales and the Alshyr were able to rise from their home planets and conquer a portion of their respective galaxies!

Since the races that evolved from more high-class planets tended to possess a lot more inborn advantages, they often overwhelmed their alien rivals and gained supremacy over the weaker races!

What was strange about the human race was how its weak members overcame their disadvantages and defeated alien civilizations that were much greater, much more powerful and much older than their own nascent civilization!

Though mankind was just one of the many organic species to have evolved from Old Earth, it was by far its greatest natural product!

By providing the circumstances that facilitated the evolution and proliferation of ancient humans, this once-savage race of hunter-gatherers had risen up and developed traits that gave their descendants a chance of overturning the previous order in a galaxy that had long been carved up by many alien hegemony.

In fact, many races with the potential to dominate had emerged throughout the history of the Milky Way.

The vast majority of them had failed to displace even a single existing alien civilization!

Only a few newcomers succeeded in toppling their rivals, and none were as successful as the human race!

The tale of humanity's rise was extremely improbable. Not only did it rely on a lot of lucky encounters, but also received a push from the shadows.

Regardless, the human race succeeded against all odds and exploded onto the galaxy with indomitable momentum!

With each successful expansion of the borders of human space, the people that reigned over their expanding empires became more convinced of their specialness.

Although it did not look like it at first, the human race was the chosen race of the galaxy!

Humans were stronger than any alien species!

The victors of many wars and the heirs to the conquerors attempted to find a clear and simple explanation for all of these successes.

Just like other typical humans, they ignored the many factors that contributed to humanity's unlikely rise and latched on to just a handful of factors as the central basis of their theories!

This resulted in the rise of popularity of many odd and not-so-logical beliefs.

One of them was the worship of the planet that spawned the human race.

This ordinary globe that was not that remarkable or even unique in the Milky Way turned into an object that was worshiped by many humans!

No matter whether they were Terrans or citizens of other states, as long as they became steeped in the remarkable history of humanity's extraordinary rise, many of them developed the tendency to worship the planet of origin!

For this reason, Old Earth became the most famed, desirable and precious planet of human civilization.

Once the seat of power of humanity's only unified empire at the time, Old Earth and much of the Sol System had become a lot calmer these days.

This was because the Greater Terran United Confederation decided not to risk any further damage to mankind's greatest planet and shift their capital elsewhere.

Once the Terran Confederation started ruling its massive superstate in a much more powerful star system in the galactic center, the Sol System seemingly went back in time before humanity became dominant.

Though much of its defenses remained, a lot of urban settlements and other man-made traces disappeared from the surface of the planet.

Under the guiding hand of the greatest experts of the Terran Confederation, Old Earth slowly and steadily regained a stable and healthy ecosystem. Tranquility had returned to much of the surface as the number of cities and towns drastically dropped!

In addition, the Terrans heavily restricted access to their historical heritage site, thereby preventing a flood of tourists from overrunning and ruining its idyllic environment.

For many centuries, Old Earth regained its status as the jewel of the human race.

As the most precious heritage of mankind, only a tiny proportion of Terran citizens were allowed to reside on the planet.

The right to live and breathe on the same planet where their grand species had emerged upon was considered one of the highest honors a Terran citizen could receive!

No more than 1 billion residents were allowed to live on Old Earth at any time!

Deaths and departures frequently took place among a population of this size, but the free slots instantly got filled up as the people on the waiting list finally received their turn!

The selection and order of the waiting list was an entirely different subject altogether. No average Terran citizen could realistically get to the front of the list in their lifetimes.

In fact, most people didn't even have the qualifications to put their names on it in the first place!

The reality was that only the richest and wealthiest citizens of the Terran Confederation were able to grasp this precious opportunity.

This basically translated to the members of the ancient clans that dominated the different star sectors and star clusters of the Terran Confederation!

Almost every single person walking or floating above the quaint and historical streets of the settlements of Old Earth were the elites of their grand society.

In general, the demographics of the planet's population could roughly be split into three categories.

First, there were the old and retired Terrans who had once contributed much to the Confederation.

To reward these dignified statesmen and soldiers for their exceptional service, their sponsors arranged the highest and most precious form of retirement for them. No Terran could dream of a greater way to enjoy the twilight of their lives than to pass their remaining years on humanity's origin planet!

Second, there were the enthusiasts of all ages who insisted on living on Old Earth for at least a portion of their lives!

While not all of them were diehard fanatics, they still possessed a lot of reverence towards Old Earth and weren't afraid to sacrifice a huge amount of money, resources and opportunities just to gain permission to live on this sacred planet!

Third were the young and growing scions of the ancient clans. While their contributions to the Confederation were too trivial to count, their powerful relatives were different.

On this particular day, a youthful woman in her late teens sat in a park while studying the archival battle footage of one of the most famous and renowned mechs of the Terran Confederation!

The slim and blonde woman garbed in an exquisitely tasteful yet anachronistic brown adventurer's coat sighed.

"None of my teachers and professors have the knowledge I need."

The woman happened to be a recent graduate from Newcastle University, one of Old Earth's many ancient educational institutions that had managed to survive up to this date.

In the backdrop, numerous younger students garbed in their interpretation of ancient human Earth wear hurriedly ran or floated through the campus of the university in order to catch their next classes or appointments.

The woman studying the footage of the legendary Ouroboros no longer had to attend any of them because she already had a coveted degree in mech design in her pocket.

"I thought that I could find the secret of designing a mech like the Ouroboros after five years of living and studying on Old Earth. I was wrong."

Her expression turned glum. Though her ancient clan was on the rise, it had only been able to give her a temporary student quota for five years.

Regardless of whether she obtained her university degree or not, the authorities in charge of the planet would mercilessly boot her out of the planet if she stayed just a second too long!

She enjoyed her precious time in the city of Newcastle and made a lot of friends and connections among the talented and wealthy scions that had been her classmates.

Yet she never managed to get close to the only goal she truly cared about.

"I promised grandpa that I would reproduce his greatest work and design a second Ouroboros! If I cannot accomplish this on Old Earth, then I will find my chance at another place!"

This was the conviction of Alexa Streon, the granddaughter of General Axelar Streon!

As Alexa switched off the physical projection and stood up in order to prepare for her departure from Old Earth, the air suddenly froze.

Every student, every professor, every guard and every staff member at the campus felt as if the air around them had become charged.

Other Terrans living on the other parts of the planet also experienced the phenomenon.

Then, they started to feel the rise of something great!

Many of the shocked and bewildered Terrans looked down as they felt as if an enormous earthquake was about to beset the entire planet.

Their eyes dilated as they felt incredibly small as humanity's home planet seemingly grew unstable!

This was extremely weird as none of the sophisticated sensors that watched out for incidents like these ever detected anything weird!

Old Earth was completely stable as intended, yet every single resident of the sacred planet could not help but feel as if the planet beneath them was shaking like an overloading engine!

"What is this..."

"Did the Rubarthans set off a superbomb?!"

"Wait! It's not an earthquake! Our planet... is coming alive!"

"What?! Have you been smoking too much of that stinky grass lately?!"

Only a few people made the ridiculous claim that Old Earth was coming alive. Others instantly shot down their theories as they did their best to find a rational explanation for what was happening.

Alexa Streon was different, though.

As one of the few Terrans that not only obtained the privilege to reside on Old Earth for a time but also had the honor of visiting, touching and interacting her grandfather's impressive ace mech many times in her youth, she felt that the grand presence buried deep below her feet shared at least few semblances to the Ouroboros!

"What is this?!"

It was as if Old Earth had awoken for the very first time!

As the planet seemed to rouse to life, the Terran residents became so enthralled that they didn't know what to make of this odd phenomenon.

Though the strange feeling emanating from the planet hadn't been that strong or well-defined, millions of pilgrims and fanatics dropped to their knees and prostrated in what they believed to be the mother of humanity arousing herself from her dormancy!

Yet before they could experience any more of this, the rising presence buried deep below the surface suddenly weakened until the Terrans could feel nothing more.

In the end, every still or prostrating Terran felt awkward as the sacred planet turned completely normal in a matter of seconds.

"What... happened?"

"I don't know, but we need to find an explanation for this phenomenon!"

Despite the brief duration of this global event, its ripple effects gradually spread far and wide, affecting not only the Terran Confederation, but also the rest of human civilization!

Chapter 4035 Unintentional

"Uhm... I didn't intend to do that."

An awkward silence ensued as both Ves Larkinson and Erexia Aduc remained frozen as they stared at the empty pedestal before them. The second and much more hidden heirloom of the Aduc Family had disappeared.

No. Disappeared was not the right word for it. The centuries-old scroll that dated all the way back to the Age of Conquest had crumbled before their eyes!

Before this point, the Annals of Terra Vita may have gradually shown greater and greater signs of aging, but the Aducs took such good care of it that it was nowhere near the end of its lifespan!

There was no reason to believe the old paper scroll had deteriorated much more extensively than expected. There were advanced sensors in the small and isolated chamber that were monitoring the condition of the relic nonstop.

Yet only a few minutes after Ves, or more precisely Gaia, spiritually reached out to the scroll and resonated with its dense collection of spiritual letters, everything changed!

Ves wasn't really sure what happened. All he felt from the spiritual entity that he was channeling with his mind was that Gaia had become incredibly active and excited!

Not only that, her contact with the true secrets of the Annals of Terra Vita seemed to have triggered a process of change and evolution that was completely unexpected!

It was as if she was absorbing whatever spiritual sustenance the old scroll had stored for centuries and used it to fuel her growth!

Even after the scroll had already crumbled, Gaia was nowhere done with her shift. As the powerful spirit slowly retracted her presence from his mind on her own accord, he could feel that she was rapidly growing more powerful and complex.

What puzzled Ves was that despite the destruction of the Annals of Terra Vita, the flow of energy hadn't stopped!

In fact, as soon as the energies began to pour in, they quickly expanded in both quantity and quality.

The situation completely and utterly left him speechless. He was pretty certain that he had not yet designed and published a single mech with Gaia as a design spirit.

Where the hell was she getting all of this spiritual feedback from?! How could she be earning so much sustenance, and why did it keep increasing in magnitude!

Right now, the amount of energy she received had already surpassed the amount of feedback that the Superior Mother received from trillions of devoted Hexer believers!

"No wait! Much of this energy... is of a higher grade!"

There was only a single instance where he came in touch with this type of high-quality energy in the past.

That was back when he was mucking about in the Nyxian Gap while playing around with dark gods like the Inexorable One and the Unending One!

Ves quickly tried to recall his memories of the time and dug up the observations and conclusions he had made.

According to his theories at the time, faith energy was a form of high-quality or even transcendental energy that was somehow generated by the worship of believers in their supposed 'gods'!

It dwelled and circulated in a deeper part of the imaginary realm.

While it shared many similarities to the spiritual feedback that Ves was familiar with, faith energy was a qualitatively better phenomenon altogether.

There was much that Ves didn't know about faith energy!

Perhaps the only solid information he possessed about it was that neither him nor any of his design spirits were strong and developed enough to gather and receive sustenance from this mysterious but extremely potent energy.

The first challenge was receiving it. Ordinary spiritual entities couldn't even gain access to it in the first place. Ves was a little better off as he could consciously extend his influence deeper into the imaginary realm.

Yet then he needed to overcome the second challenge, which was trying to make sure he could endure the extremely potent power of this new type of energy!

From what he could figure out, not even the Superior Mother was qualified to gather and absorb faith energy!

If she couldn't do it, Ves would have to be dreaming if he thought that he could do any better!

He speculated that he would have to advance to Master Mech Designer or Star Designer in order to get started on this. He also guessed that faith energy might be one of the secrets of these transcendent ranks.

Whatever the case, after he initially came across faith energy, he never really did anything with this discovery because he already concluded that he lacked the strength to do anything meaningful.

He expected that he would need to progress for many decades before he could start experimenting with this more powerful form of energy feedback.

He never expected that his latest spiritual product not only got in touch with faith energy at the starting point of her existence, but also possessed the ability to absorb it all without getting burned!

"What have I created?!"

Ves gradually felt he was losing even more control over his newborn spiritual product. Though he developed all of his creations with the ability to grow and evolve over time, Gaia was transforming way too fast!

This was incredibly dangerous because not only was Gaia experiencing a lot of growth without having spent much time with Ves and the Larkinson Clan, her evolution also had the potential to change and overwhelm her original programming!

This included all of the precautions and contingencies he had buried inside of her! Would she still remain loyal and affectionate towards him and his clan after she experienced thousands of years of growth in a single instance!?

"Gaia!" He conveyed!

The evolving spiritual entity was almost completely immersed in her own world. Whatever inheritance she received from the Annals of Terra Vita had given her such a massive boost that she could not pull herself away from the onset of power and knowledge that poured into her spiritual being!

Gaia only briefly responded to his call by giving him the spiritual equivalent of a pat on the head. After that, she fully retracted her presence from his mind, having fully returned to the body of the Old Lady in order to complete her profound evolution and process her humongous gains!

The chamber truly went still at this time.

Without Gaia's powerful presence and glow, the atmosphere was no longer as heavy as before.

Both Ves and Matriarch Erexia could breathe easier as of now, but both of them were still impacted by what they witnessed.

"I'm sorry." Ves plainly said without any pretension. "I didn't mean to, but my actions inadvertently led to the destruction of your relic. Your scroll..."

The leader of the Aduc Family did not look upset. "It is not important, Patriarch Ves. I have seen first-hand what took place. You bear none of the fault. I should thank you, even."

"Huh?"

"Though it is true that our family has owned the Annals of Terra Vita and managed to decipher a portion of its contents, we never had the impression that we managed to penetrate its core. It is only now that I realize that we were never intended users of it at all. We were merely tasked with holding it so that one day our fated goddess would come and receive the sacrifice prepared by a cult that has worshiped her centuries ago! It all makes sense!"

Ves almost wanted to sputter when he heard this ridiculous chain of logic.

How could a spiritual sorcerer deliberately create a scroll filled with spiritual secrets at least six centuries in advance, pass it on to the Aduc Family that was still an established Terran power at the time, and expect that a spiritual entity as powerful and aligned to Earth as Gaia to swoop in and unlock the very same relic?

There was no way this was plausible!

He was more inclined to believe that the Annals of Terra Vita was meant for another earth worshiper. Gaia just happened to unlock it by chance because her powerful earth, life and wood domain allowed her to spoof past its security measures and unlock the highest possible authority from the scroll!

The problem was that Gaia happened to be so strong that her power overwhelmed the fragile paper vessel, causing it to crumble as the excess of spiritual power was too much for the material to bear!

This was also a good reminder for Ves to pay a lot more attention to the hardness of the materials of his products.

It wouldn't do for his totems and mechs to break apart because they couldn't handle the excessive flow or concentration of potent energies!

While Ves deeply wanted to refute and correct Matriarch Erex's rationalization, he did not choose to do so in the end.

The story was implausible, but as long as she and the Aducs believed in it, then none of the blame would fall onto Ves!

The only other candidate that could bear the fault of the destruction of this ancient relic was the Mother of Earth herself, and it was unthinkable for her newly-converted believers to accuse the object of their faith!

This was why Matriarch Erexī did not dare to even think about taking the culprit to account!

The pair of leaders slowly exited from the secret chamber when they both confirmed that the Annals of Terra Vita was completely gone.

Even if they recovered every single piece of dust and reconstructed the entire scroll by utilizing advanced technology, what emerged would simply be a shell of its former self.

Without the spiritual letters that a mysterious spiritual sorcerer had imprinted on its surface, the scroll was just a worthless roll of paper!

"I do not think our relic is gone." Matriarch Erexī guessed as she led Ves to the hangar bay of the Green Dream.

"Hmm?"

"The Mother of Earth read the scroll that we have kept for all this time." She spoke with increasing certainty in her tone. "Scrolls are only carriers of knowledge. Now that Gaia has taken all that she can from our relic, I am confident that my fellow family members and I can continue to unearth the secrets of Old Earth! The only difference is that we no longer have to rely on our power to interpret a scroll that was not meant to be read by mortal eyes. We only have to visit our Green Sanctum and pray to our goddess in order to receive her tutelage!"

While her words sounded like a desperate attempt to downplay the loss of a scroll that had allowed many members of the Aducs Family to develop a uniform affinity for earth, life and wood-attributed energy, Ves actually found them to be plausible at this time.

Ves did not know exactly what Gaia had gained from freeloading off the Aduc Family for a second time, but it was sure to be rich!

As her creator, Ves should be entitled to receive a share of her gains.

Will she be willing to share, though?

He briefly turned his head towards a specific direction. Beyond his sight was the Green Sanctum, where an enormous oak tree was swaying on its own accord.

Gaia's humongous feast was changing her essence even now, causing many of the surrounding Aduc worshipers to feel both joy and awe at the increasing amount of power exuded from the massive tree!

Ves turned back but grimaced. He couldn't get a hold of his spiritual product at this time. He needed to wait until she was done with whatever she was doing in order to obtain his answers.

"I truly hope that Gaia will be generous enough to pass on what she has learned from the Annals of Terra Vita." He eventually said. "She might not make it easy, though. You will need to show constant respect and devotion. Do not slack off and always pay attention to her reactions. I hope that will be enough for you and your fellow Aducs to continue your development."

Chapter 4036 Two Directions

The Ruined Temple had undergone a major upheaval!

Even though the Water Keepers were still embroiled in a power struggle that took place behind closed doors, every other cultist stationed at the Ruined Temple had become excited beyond frenzy!

The Earth Shrine did not keep the news a secret because an event of this import was simply too significant to the Five Scrolls Compact!

After all, one of the ultimate goals that the cultists were striving for was to open up a passage for the immortal gods to descend upon the Milky Way and turn it into a paradise!

"Our immortal god has answered our pleas! Out of all of the branches of our Compact, our Earth Shrine shall be the first to welcome a supreme deity to our galaxy!"

"The Son of Earth is our greatest Holy Son! His four centuries of penance has finally been recognized by our immortal god!"

"Wait, why was the Sacred Scroll only active for a few minutes?"

"Maybe our immortal god is still on her way. Without the support of any rituals and all of our Sacred Scrolls, even a high one may struggle to travel across an unimaginable distance that separates the kingdom of the gods from our lowly realm."

While it was rather strange that the Earth Scroll did not maintain a connection to their immortal god for long, the fact that it showed the distinct and unmistakable signs of activity was enough to raise the morale of the Compact!

After the immense blow of the Great Betrayal and the constant lack of progress into retrieving any of the missing or stolen Sacred Scrolls, the cultists who believed in the cause finally gained a measure of hope!

The Five Scrolls Compact may be powerful enough to make the Big Two uncomfortable, but even its most delusional members admitted that their strength was not as great as before.

It was a pipedream for them to topple the MTA and CFA that had grown stronger after harvesting much of the resources of human space after their successful coup!

Yet the Compact cultists possessed such strong and unwavering faith in the makers of the Sacred Scrolls that they instantly assumed that their underground organization would be able to rise again with the arrival of just a single immortal god!

No matter how powerful the Big Two had become and no matter how much human space had grown, as long as the Compact was helmed by a single peak figure, it could win every decisive battle that mattered!

No MTA god mech or CFA battleship would be able to withstand a single blow from a true immortal god!

The Compact leaders weren't even scared of the secret megaprojects that the CFA and MTA cooked up in their hidden labs anymore!

Yet just as the Earth Keepers and the other other core Compact members started to plan out their much-accelerated road to trans-galactic domination, the Earth Scroll never woke up after falling silent again.

It was as if it only received a single blip before the immortal god that connected with it had fallen out of contact!

As the silence stretched on for days, the Compact cultists finally came off their high. While they were still excited beyond measure, they realized that the immortal god might not be as close as they initially expected.

Perhaps her arrival might not be as imminent as they thought!

Nobody was able to guess how long it took before the Compact cultists could greet the supreme deity that they had slaved for all this time. It could take months, years or even centuries for the supreme god that corresponded to the Earth Scroll to fully descend onto their mortal realm!

"Do not lose your patience!" The Son of Earth finally came out and declared. "The passage of time is meaningless to the gods who possess an unending lifespan. No matter whether we must wait until the end of our own lives or pass on our holy mission to the future generation, we must never lose faith and allow ourselves to be found wanting by our immortal god!"

The Compact members stationed in the Ruined Temple may have slowed down their movements, but they weren't as subdued as before.

Knowing that an immortal god was on the way was a profound change from before where they weren't even sure if they could complete their holy mission in the first place.

The reinvigorated Earth Keepers and other leaders pulled out the plans that had been collecting dust over the centuries and revised them to fit the current parameters.

Not only that, but the Earth Keepers also attempted to predict when and where their immortal god would descend.

Many of the core members reached out to the Compact's vast and secretive intelligence network while the Son of Earth used his major authority as well as the familiarity built over centuries of penance to beseech more information out of the Earth Scroll.

None of the Sacred Scrolls were easy to communicate with. They were not living sages or electronic databases, but something greater and more profound entirely.

Everyone who had come into touch with one of the Sacred Scrolls instinctively developed the belief that these divine objects did not belong in the material realm at all! They were way too advanced and transcendent to belong in a filthy place like normal reality.

This was the explanation that the Compact cultists had come up with to explain why their Keepers persistently found it difficult to obtain any blessings and insights from the Sacred Scrolls.

Not even the Son of Earth managed to obtain too many clues from the Earth Scroll this time. His authority was way too low compared to an actual immortal god so just the act of trying to find the details of a great deity was bordering on blasphemy!

If not for the Compact's poor state and the need to figure out how long they needed to wait, the Holy Son wouldn't have dared to make this move.

He just hoped that all of the years of penance had won over enough approval from the Earth Scroll to obtain at least a single clue about the immortal god that had briefly reached out to the sacred artifact.

All the Earth Keepers knew from the brief moment of contact was that the immortal god was a woman!

The matronly, earthy aura that emanated from the Sacred Scroll at the time could not be mistaken by anyone!

At this time, the Son of Earth had floated upwards until he had reached the end of the massive pedestal.

Only a few members were permitted to come this close to any of the Sacred Scrolls. The brown-robed figure did his best to surrender himself to the massive Earth Scroll and commune with it up close.

His wrinkled, bearded figure frowned for a time before it spasmed in pain.

None of the Earth Keepers waiting down below dared to make a move or comment on the current display.

Before the Sacred Scroll, each of them were merely ants!

After half an hour of looking for answers, the Holy Son finally couldn't take it any longer and backed off from the holy artifact.

His face visibly showed relief as his feet touched down onto the floor of the main hall.

The brown-robed figure turned and met the eyes of his fellow supplicants.

"I have answers."

Many of the Keepers grew excited again. Their eyes shone with excitement and they had to suppress their formidable auras in order to prevent showing any disrespect at this holy site.

The Son of Earth raised a wrinkled hand. "I have answers, but I did not say I have every answer. The Sacred Scroll was... not as illuminating as we wish, but it has seen fit to bestow me with two possible directions."

The man with the highest authority of the Earth Scroll pointed in a specific direction.

"Old Earth."

The man then pointed upwards and at an angle. "The Red Ocean."

The Holy Son slowly lowered our arm. "Our answers lie in these two locations. If we do not want to prove ourselves to be incompetent and unworthy of our immortal god's favor, we must reach them both and find our answers at these places."

Neither of them were easy for the Compact to deal with. The Terran Confederation as well as the Big Two strictly guarded Old Earth due to its immense historical and cultural heritage.

Though there had been a time when the Compact completely dominated the Sol System from the shadows, this was no longer the case.

The Earth Keepers did not look intimidated, though. No matter how much effort they needed to put into opening up a pathway to humanity's home planet, they were willing to do anything in order to fulfill their holy mission!

Compared to restoring all of the Sacred Scrolls and restarting the grand ritual that was supposed to summon the immortal gods, it was much easier for the current state of the Compact to gain entry to humanity's most precious globe!

"We can either enter Old Earth quietly or with a war party." An Earth Speaker spoke up. "Regardless of what we choose, we will have to make great sacrifices in order to circumvent and overpower the security measures that our old enemies have prepared."

The Holy Son fell into thought. "If stepping foot on Old Earth is the only requirement for us to summon our immortal god, then I would not hesitate to bring as many of our holy warriors as we can rally. However, the Sacred Scroll has given me no clear answers regarding our supreme deity's arrival. Take the subtle approach first."

"By your command!"

"The Red Ocean is more important to our mission. I can feel it." The Son of Earth slowly said as he gazed in the direction of the distant dwarf galaxy once again.

"Your Holiness?"

The bearded figure did not have any clear answers regarding the Red Ocean's importance, but he could still rely on his formidable intellect and intuition to generate a few guesses!

"The Red Ocean... may be where our immortal god descends first!"

Many Keepers gasped. They all wondered why their supreme deity would opt to arrive in a small and shabby dwarf galaxy instead of the more impressive and resource-rich Milky Way.

Was their immortal god weaker than they thought? Was she too afraid to land directly in the Milky Way and attract instant retribution from the Big Two's trump cards?

"PRESUMPTUOUS!" The Son of Earth boomed, stopping his fellow Keepers from developing any further doubts about their immortal god!

"The journey is long and our immortal god may have to put in more effort to navigate towards the Milky Way without the support of our Sacred Scrolls. However, remember what the Red Ocean is famed for. It is a dwarf galaxy that is defined by phasewater. This makes it the natural gateway to our corner of the cosmos."

This meant that the Red Ocean may be the most efficient landing point for any extradimensional or extragalactic entity looking to arrive in the Local Group from afar!

It was just like deciding whether to enter a home through the door or by ramming right through the wall.

The weak had no choice but to use the door but the strong could choose to enter however they wanted.

That did not mean that the strong would stop using doors entirely. It was still a lot more efficient and less costly to keep using proper entrances!

After all of the Compact members in the Earth Shrine heard this explanation, they all became more enlightened.

If this explanation was accurate, then the Compact members sent to the Red Ocean may be the first ones to greet their long-awaited immortal god!

The Son of Earth obviously couldn't go by himself. Sacred Speaker Daphania's mishap had reminded them all that even the greatest authorities of the Five Scrolls Compact could not be arrogant outside of the Ruined Temple!

Another Keeper from the Earth Shrine must be dispatched to prepare for the arrival of their great deity.

"Seeker Leorax Remanos."

"I am here, Your Holiness." One of the kneeling figures spoke while holding his fist against his chest.

"You shall lead our delegation to the Red Ocean and investigate any possible signs of our deity's descent. Until our immortal god arrives, you must remain incognito and never allow the traitors to discover your tracks. This is your mission."

"I shall prove worthy of your trust." Keeper Leorax declared.

"For the immortal gods."

"For the dream of our ascension."

Chapter 4037 Consolidating Spirits

"Phew." Ves wiped an imaginary sweat off his brow. "Nothing bad happened in the end."

The accidental destruction of the Annals of Terra Vita did not affect the relationship between the Larkinson Clan and the Aduc Family.

Though the loss of such a precious relic was not a trivial matter, the Aducs who knew about it did not act as if they suffered any loss.

The rise of Gaia and her occupation of the body of the Old Lady was far more significant to the Aduc Family!

Gaia's emergence overshadowed every other concern that the Aducs might have. They didn't even care anymore about the fact that the Larkinson Clan originally blackmailed them into giving up a lot of concessions.

This was just as Ves predicted!

He once again experienced the power of faith. It seemed that whenever gods got involved, everyone that got taken in by them instantly lost at least 75 percent of their rationality and common sense!

"Not even scientists and engineers are exempt from this phenomenon." Ves contemptuously sneered.

For all of their passion for exogeology and exobiology, the highly-educated terraformers had allowed themselves to get taken advantage of way too easily now that Gaia had come into the picture!

Their current tolerance and lack of critical thinking was a far cry from how the Aducs initially behaved and sounded like at the beginning!

"I will never allow myself to fall into the same trap!"

Ves did not believe in any god and he intended for that to stay this way!

It didn't matter whether his new primordial earth 'goddess' had become so powerful to the point where she was able to harvest the earnest faith from all of the devoted worshipers of Old Earth without getting overwhelmed.

Faith was just another form of energy to Ves! As an engineer and a mech designer, no form of energy was sacred to him. Whether it was spiritual or not, he was confident he could design and make the right machines to harness every form of energy as long as he accumulated the appropriate knowledge and resources.

In his mind, Gaia was merely a living spiritual machine that accidentally got to absorb and process faith energy in advance.

Now that he thought about it, almost everything about Gaia was either accidental or unintentional.

As Ves leaned forward and picked up the wooden statuette of Gaia that he had recently created, he tried his best to reach out to his new spiritual product and see whether he could have a good talk with the entity.

"...Nothing."

Ves grunted in disgust as he tossed his little totem back onto the deck.

Gaia was still out of control!

If she was as weak as the likes of Kalo and Trisk, then he would have easily been able to smack some sense into the Mother of Earth.

Unfortunately, in his infinite wisdom, his decision to jumpstart her growth by sacrificing all of the universal life energy of an entire vial of high-grade life prolonging treatment serum was far more consequential than he thought!

While he expected this radical act to make Gaia a lot stronger from the start, she wasn't supposed to be strong to the point where Ves couldn't apply any levers to control her behavior anymore!

"Goldie. Come out and see me for a moment."

Nyaaaaaa!

The adorable ancestral spirit of the Larkinson Clan seemingly woke up and emerged from the Larkinson Mandate that was hanging on the side of his chief bodyguard's combat armor.

Goldie quickly floated over to Ves and pressed his cheeks with her own intangible form.

"You're such a good kitty." Ves grinned as he scratched her chin and stroked her slender back. "You're much more obedient than Lucky."

Nyaaaa~

"Why can't Gaia be as cute and open to dialogue as you. Maybe I should have made her as a cat instead of a human woman."

Nyaaaa!

The Golden Cat obviously liked the idea and wiggled her soft paws in response.

Ves sighed. "Gaia is one experiment that I will not repeat. I can't let my impatience get the better of me and pursue blind power at the cost of giving up control. Why spend all of that time, effort and resources into creating a new spirit only for it to go AWOL?"

Nyaaa nyaaaa.

"I would be grateful if you and your fellow spirits could do that. It might be too late, but anything you can do to pull Gaia closer to our clan is appreciated."

He talked a bit more with Goldie. Even though she had grown a lot smarter, wiser and more powerful after years of receiving spiritual feedback from an expanding and

increasingly vigorous population of Larkinsons, to him she was still the adorable mascot that he made to liven up his clan!

Compared to natural spiritual entities such as the Titania and artificial spiritual entities that received a rapid growth spurt such as the Superior Mother, he still liked the ones that started off weaker but grew step by step alongside the Larkinsons over several years.

As Ves reflected on his current collection of design spirits, he concluded that he needed to slow down and consolidate his existing relationships with his intangible friends.

While Ves possessed the power to create any spirit as long as he had access to the right spiritual ingredients, blindly creating one spiritual product after another without managing them properly sounded like a disaster waiting to happen!

He frowned a bit. "I'll stop once I have dealt with the Phase King. There is no pressing need to add any additional spirits for the time being as my existing collection already covers a wide range of possible mech designs. Even if there is no perfect match, I just need to learn how to stretch and expand the scope of my existing options."

The way he differentiated Lufa's glow by selectively filtering out different components was a great source of inspiration to him. He felt that he could achieve entirely new results by tinkering with the glows of spiritual entities such as Helena and the Illustrious One.

"I need to increase my utilization rate of my existing spirits before I should think about adding any new ones!"

He already formed a few possible ideas on how to do that for his next batch of design projects, but he would have to wait until he could properly explore this research direction.

"Let's take care of my immediate business first."

For the following days, he spent time on various necessary chores.

He met with the Aducs several times in order to decide on how to staff and organize the T Institute's first round of research projects.

He provided his input on the selection of the site where the Larkinson Clan would build its first manufacturing compound on the surface of Davute VII.

He liaised with various other business partners such as the Murphy Family and the Voiken Family to increase his friendship with them and make sure their planned cooperative ventures remained on track.

He also made a start with tackling his design projects, though his heavy responsibilities prevented him from immersing himself into his work and entering the best possible state of mind to design his upcoming machines.

The reason why he couldn't put his all into his design work was not because Aurelia increasingly demanded his attention, but because he was waiting for one important event.

One day, his comm received a chime. Ves grinned as he received the notification he was waiting for. He reached down and opened his desk drawer in order to pull out a few boxes. "I'm ready to go at any time."

His body and cargo dematerialized from his office aboard the Spirit of Bentheim and almost instantly appeared at a secret location that did not look like any other places he had visited before.

"This should be an underground base." Ves quickly concluded.

The expansive entry hall was covered with strong materials and displayed several pieces of advanced tech. The markings and symbols instantly revealed that the facility belonged to the MTA.

A nearby gate slid open to reveal a familiar figure.

"Jovy! How is my fellow tier 6 galactic citizen doing these days? Am I finally cleared to perform my procedure?"

The MTA Journeyman twitched his lips in amusement. "Good day, Ves. Just to be clear, people don't generally mention their citizenship tiers or each other tiers in ordinary conversations. It is considered rude and improper to make unsolicited comparisons of one's status."

"Relax. We're buddies, right? Besides, we both belong to the same tier. We should celebrate this accomplishment!"

Jovie made a helpless expression. Ves was acting more and more familiar and informal around him. This was a type of behavior that he never received from his fellow peers within the MTA. They were all competitors as well as colleagues so their friendships were always marked by a sense of distance and rivalry.

"I don't know why I put up with you sometimes." Jovy said as he beckoned Ves to follow him deeper into the underground MTA facility.

"Hehe. I may be a respectable galactic citizen these days, but I have never forgotten my roots as a space peasant."

"You could adjust your behavior to conform to your new status, you know. I have heard that many space peasants are eager to do so once they have achieved their promotions."

"I'm not a normal mech designer." Ves smirked. "Unlike them, I like to stay true to myself. I think this is more conducive to my work and progression. I may put on different masks depending on the situation that I am in, but in truth I am most comfortable and productive when I am acting like my true self."

Jovy Armalon looked envious. "That makes sense. You have much more freedom to do what you want since you lead your own clan. I am not as free as you. No matter what, I must always maintain the decorum that is expected of a mecher. Behaving otherwise will tarnish the dignity and reputation of our Association."

"Hmmm."

Ves once dreamt of being born within the MTA, but he had long abandoned this silly fantasy.

The Association was a fantastic organization for many reasons, but someone who craved freedom and autonomy would probably hate the ridiculous degree of control and expectations that it set over everyone.

The two chatted a bit before Jovy brought up the most important issue.

"I see you have brought a couple of boxes. They will need to undergo an inspection before you can do whatever it is you need to complete the upcoming procedure. Are they dangerous?"

"No." Ves shook. "They're just space rocks. Slightly special space rocks, but they're pretty much indistinguishable from any other random piece of space junk that you can pick up from a nearby asteroid belt."

"If they're ordinary rocks, then you wouldn't have stored them in those lockboxes. Is there anything special about them that we don't know?" Jovy casually asked and fished for information.

Ves wanted to downplay the value and significance of his P-stones before he developed an interesting thought.

In the past, he put a lot of effort into hiding and obfuscating the purpose of his P-stones and other spiritually reactive materials.

Now that he had developed a closer relationship with the MTA and a couple of its factions, why should he maintain his paranoid insistence of keeping secrets?

The Survivalists and Transhumanists were already on to him! They already became aware of at least half of his spiritual shenanigans and were constantly finding out more about his work over time.

"These P-stones as I call them don't look special at first, but they are extremely important for my work." Ves admitted after making a conscious choice. "They possess unique characteristics that many other materials lack. I will transmit you a document that details my studies on them. Right now, my biggest problem is that I haven't been able to find any new P-stones as of late, but if I can borrow the power of your Association, maybe you can alleviate my shortage."

If Ves could borrow the MTA's help to obtain more spiritually reactive materials, then he could massively expand the scope of his spiritual engineering work!

Chapter 4038 Subsidized Travel

"So... can you help me get my hands on more P-stones?"

"I will see what I can do, Ves." Jovy said as he used his implant to scan through the documents and data that Ves had sent via his comm. "It will be difficult to meet your request if your hypothesis about the Nyxian Gap being the sole source of P-stones turns out to be true. I don't know how much you pay attention to the star sector that you have left, but the entire region is embroiled by war."

Ves nodded. He bet that his understanding of the Nyxian War was much greater than that of Jovy. After all, not everyone was privileged to receive a first-hand account of the battles that took place over there from one of the principal combatants of the Oblivion Empire!

"Even if our organization can get our hands on a P-stone, shipping them all the way over to Davute is not a cheap process. We may control all of the beyonder gates, but that doesn't mean we can ignore the cost of using all of them in succession."

"The typical P-stone is only as large as a human head at most. Surely it doesn't take that much money to put a few boxes worth of these rocks on one of your enormous ships?"

"It's not that simple, Ves. There is always way more demand on transportation than what our gate networks can handle at this time. Do you think the prices we charge for transportation are cheap?"

"Uhh... they're pretty high, to say the least. What I don't understand is why the fees are higher for second-raters and first-raters. Isn't a portal just a portal?"

Jovy responded with a smirk. "As a mech designer and an entrepreneur, haven't you ever heard of price discrimination strategies? A Terran fleet owner is willing to pay much

more MTA credits for the same service than a third-class fleet owner. Building and operating the beyonder gates is truly expensive, you know. The early generation gates that we have put into use are still so costly and inefficient that we are forced to subsidize some forms of gate travel."

"What?" Ves looked surprised at him. "The Association is actually losing money by allowing for gate travel?"

That sounded highly uncharacteristic for the MTA. The mechers never lost money in any transaction! That was practically their most important rule. Breaking it was probably a serious taboo in their eyes!

"It's not as bad as you think." Jovy said. "The reason why we charge different prices depending on the class of the fleet is because the cost required to enable gate transit is different depending on several key variables. The greater the volume, mass and quality of materials of the ships and cargo passing through, the more it costs to maintain the portals and enable the passage."

In other words, third-class fleets that were typically smaller and did not contain any high-quality exotics were easier to transport over the gate networks!

This was an interesting detail that Ves did not know beforehand.

"I see. A P-stone shouldn't be anything special compared to more special materials. If you ever find a few asteroids worth of rock with the properties I've mentioned, then please try and ship everything you can to Davute. I will cover the cost as long as I can pay with MTA credits."

"I will see what I can do, but the premise is that we can actually find these odd rocks of yours." Jovy tentatively promised. "Master Moira Willix has remained in the Komodo Star Sector, and her research project is related to the Nyxian Gap, so she should be able to work on this favor of yours."

"That's a name I haven't heard in a while." Ves said with a slightly fond expression. She was probably the first high-ranked mecher that he befriended. "How is she doing these days?"

"Her situation hasn't changed. No. That is not quite true. She received a lot of appreciation from our faction for successfully pulling you in and facilitating a fruitful cooperation. However, she doesn't care too much for recognition, MTA merits or other rewards. The only goal that Masters are truly striving for is making the next step. To do that, they must qualitatively transform their realized design philosophies to a degree that completely surpasses their efforts back when they were a Senior and lower. We won't hear from her in several decades at the very least."

Though Ves had little idea on what Masters needed to do in order to get any hope at advancing to Star Designer, he understood from Jovy's explanation that those who strove for more had to make a lot of sacrifices in order to reach the top.

This was a difficult choice to make as Masters could achieve so much else if they did not have to spend an inordinate amount of time on researching ways to turn the impossible into the possible.

Ves respected those that made the necessary sacrifices and dedicated much of their years on achieving a goal that they might never attain.

Given the abysmally low proportions of Star Designers relative to the population of Master mech Designers, more than 99 percent of ambitious Masters were destined to fail and squander much of their productive years!

Both Ves and Jovy fell silent for a time after this. Both of them had no doubt that they would make the same heavy choice as Master Willix if they ever realized their design philosophies.

Any decent Master would have made the same choice, actually. No one who was able to overcome the difficult hurdles that prevented Seniors from going any further were average in terms of willpower, determination and research ability!

Perhaps this was part of the reason why a lot of Masters never invested all of their energies in the mech market. Despite their superior design solutions and impressive earning abilities, Ves felt that mech designers such as Master Olson and Master Toqueman Huron only half-heartedly published their works on the mech market.

Compared to designing commercial mechs that needed to be relatively affordable and easy to produce, they would much rather work on specific commissions or experimental projects that pushed the boundaries of what they were capable of as Masters!

"We're here." Jovy suddenly announced.

After passing through a major entrance, they entered what appeared to be a medical department. Though there weren't many obvious signs of medical personnel or equipment, the hall they entered conveyed the distinctive vibe of a place where people needed psychological reassurance in order to undergo life-changing medical treatments or augmentation procedures.

One of the smooth metal walls automatically parted in order to form an opening. Jovy and Ves passed through and ended up in an observation room that looked over an extremely advanced operating theater.

Numerous doctors and other medical experts were already standing by. They stopped their conversation and greeted Jovy with respect before casting a dubious look at Ves.

"How much do they know?" Ves asked.

"Not much, I am afraid. You don't need to hide anything from them. We have already briefed them of what to expect."

"Understood."

Ves ended up saying almost nothing to the gathered doctors. He already swept them with his spiritual senses beforehand and saw that none of their spiritualities were activated. That made the probability that they could help with his upcoming operation extremely low.

"What I am about to do will solely act on an invisible and intangible part of the patient." Ves stated. "Only I can perform this operation. The only concern I have is that my work may produce feedback that directly affects the patient's body. I don't know anything about biology and the human body so just do what you can to keep his physical condition stable and alive."

"Is the procedure that dangerous?" Jovy frowned.

"Didn't I tell you that anything that is related to messing with people is inherently dangerous? While I am confident in my own abilities, I cannot account for every possibility. I have emphasized the risks of this operation several times. Ultimately, it is up to you to choose whether to trust my skills and go through with it. If you want, you can postpone this operation and wait until I have accumulated more experience."

Jovy stared at Ves for a moment before shaking his head. "No. Delaying any further will result in a lot of missed opportunities. I have already thought about this decision many times in the last few months. I don't want to fall behind any further. If your solution is good enough for you to apply it to yourself, then it is good enough for me. The sooner I go through with this, the sooner I can leverage my strengthened capabilities to progress towards Senior and Master."

"I understand. I would have made the same choice if I was in your shoes. Don't worry. I have prepared extensively for you. The companion spirit that you will receive will never be shabby."

Ves didn't need Jovy to do anything special except to lie down on an operating table, but the medical specialists obviously weren't satisfied with beginning in such a haphazard way.

The good news was that the specialists had already completed their pre-operation checks and examinations of Jovy's physical and mental state.

In order to make sure that they could respond quickly to any medical emergency that might ensue, they instructed Jovy to switch to a specialized garment before putting him into a half-open medical pod.

Though the MTA had better machines at its disposal, many of them isolated the patient completely.

Once the doctors were satisfied with their arrangements, Ves rolled his eyes and called out Blinky.

Noone showed any surprise at his companion spirit's appearance, but Ves could tell that everyone was definitely paying a lot of attention to this exotic presence!

Mrow mrow mrow~

"It's off to work again today, Blinky. Be extra careful this time as we cannot afford to fail this time. I would rather go slow and lose a bit of potential than to rush the job and make an unforgivable mistake. Is that clear?"

Mrow!

Jovy looked perplexed at the interaction.

"I thought that companion spirits are supposed to be yourself but in a different light. From the way you have been talking to each other, it's as if there is more of a separation between the two of you than you have claimed. How much of Blinky do you control, exactly?"

"Everything. Blinky is completely under my control, Jovy. I'm just talking to 'myself' out of habit. Think nothing of it. It is not as if your companion spirit will spontaneously mutate and develop an independent personality that is split from your consciousness and can even take over your body without your consent."

"...You know, that is exactly one of the nightmare scenarios that my superiors have discussed before this point."

Ves raised his eyebrow. "And they still chose to let you go through with this operation?"

"You could say that I am pioneering this new form of augmentation. I will be under strict observation for many years in order to study the full effects of obtaining a companion spirit. If everything goes well, we may ask you to augment additional mechers."

That was to be expected. Ves would be glad to see this happen. The more the MTA desired his unique services, the more they developed a vested interest in maintaining good relations with him. This was the key to survive while living under the auspices of a powerful organization!

"I'm ready, Jovy. It looks like you are ready as well. Let's begin."

However, before Ves could make his move, a strong field suddenly engulfed the operating theater!

Ves froze as he felt a strong will and presence examining him and the P-stones he brought. It was as if he could hide nothing from this oppressive influence.

"Jovy... you did not say anything about an ace pilot expanding his Saint Kingdom in the vicinity."

"Consider it a form of extra insurance. An alert ace pilot is highly observant and can easily ascertain your motives. While I do not think this precaution is needed, my superiors think otherwise."

Ace pilots possessed a terrible degree of intuition.

Though Ves did not plan to do so, if he ever wanted to affect Jovy's judgment and indoctrinate him through his new companion spirit, he would never be able to pull it off because the nearby ace pilot would definitely notice if he harbored any ill will!

Fortunately, Ves only came with pure intentions in mind this time, so he was not afraid of getting into trouble. He just grew concerned about the domain field's effect on his spiritual augmentation process.

The damned ace pilot was so strong that even the spiritual fragments stored inside his P-stones were showing signs of strain!

Ves softly cleared his throat. "I've never performed this procedure while being affected by the formidable strength of a Saint. Some of my work might get adversely affected by the pressure he exerts on our minds and my...ingredients. Can you tell this guy to take it easy? It would drastically lower the chance of anything going wrong."

Once the Saint Kingdom lost much of its bite, Ves was able to breathe a little easier. Though it was not as light as he wished, it was tolerable enough for him to proceed.

"I will start now. Get ready, because this will hurt!"

Chapter 4039 A Reality of Probabilities

Jovy Armalon was a critical client of Ves.

So far, Ves had not provided a lot of companion spirits to people. Despite their huge benefits and high utility, they were still a relatively new invention that could only be born by literally carving into a person's own spirituality!

No matter what he did, the risky process always produced an element of risk, as the most important part about creating companion spirits was that it had to be rooted in a person's spirit from the beginning!

It was like taking a sane person and deliberately imparting him or her with a split personality disorder!

There was no other way. Making an individual a little more insane than before was the necessary price that the recipient had to pay in order to gain the power of a specially-designed spiritual entity.

Ves was not unaware of the irony of this tradeoff.

Didn't the Age of Conquest originate at least in part due to more and more leaders succumbing to madness as they pursued unrestrained genetic modification and other forms of reckless augmentation?

Perhaps Ves might be following in the footsteps of those who were too eager for progress and too impatient to wait for proper studies to verify his inventions.

If so, he did not care that much. Even though he only had a few cases of successful implementations of companion spirits, he was already happy with the results so far. He wouldn't have chosen to operate on himself if he wasn't confident in his own methods!

"This should be a fairly easy job." He muttered as he placed his hand over Jovy's forehead.

The MTA Journeyman looked calmer than expected, but that was because he chose to undergo light sedation.

There was no particular rule that stated that the recipient had to be conscious and sober while undergoing the procedure.

However, since Ves performed all of his previous procedures on people when they were awake, Ves felt it was prudent to keep Jovy awake.

"This is going to hurt a bit, especially if you aren't used to stressing your spirit—, I mean your psionic core. Whatever happens, you need to remain as calm and controlled as possible. Don't let yourself get overtaken by your emotions, okay? If you let your pain, anger and or other emotions get the better of you, then you will be the equivalent of a patient thrashing on the operating table while undergoing a heart transplant surgery."

Jovy faintly nodded in understanding. "The documents you have provided to us already said as much. I have already undergone a special training program in the past few weeks. I am as ready as I can be. Come on. We mechers are not as weak as ordinary people!"

This became evident as soon as Ves used his direct physical connection to Jovy's head to examine what went on in his head.

From a spiritual perspective, Jovy's mind was purer and considerably more organized than any other Journeyman he had observed.

It was not as unnatural as he expected, and he was certain that the minds of rational mech designers were much more clean and artificial.

Still, compared to other passionate mech designers such as Ves, Jovy's mind and spirit looked remarkably organized!

Ves always suspected that the MTA possessed its own methods and solutions to produce high-ranking mech designers that possessed numerous advantages over space peasants, and this observation pretty much confirmed his guess!

The lower concentration of junk and irrelevant attributes inside Jovy's mind and spirit yielded several useful benefits over ordinary Journeymen!

A higher proportion of his very being would be dedicated towards his design philosophy, thereby giving him an inherent advantage in his future development!

In addition, Jovy would be able to maintain the same or even a higher degree of passion towards his specialty without being prone to getting distracted by irrational impulses!

Jovy had eventually become a more optimized version of a passionate mech designer! He retained almost all of the advantages of a mech designer that was incredibly dedicated towards an extreme design philosophy while also retaining a sufficient amount of rationality to base most of his decisions on facts rather than emotions!

The current situation was just one of many examples of sound decision-making. If Jovy was less rational, then he would have likely been a lot more hesitant to undergo this life-changing operation!

However, if Jovy wanted to overcome the huge gap that separated Masters from Star Designers, then he could not keep avoiding opportunities that could provide him with an enormous boost in his career.

He also wasn't willing to wait until Ves and the T Institute rigorously verified the safety of companion spirits as a new category of human augmentation.

After weighing the risks and benefits of this option, Jovy Armalon wholeheartedly put his trust in his weird and quirky friend!

As Ves reached deeper into Jovy's mind, the two became increasingly more connected to each other. Their current states were similar to the both of them forming a connection with a design network.

Ves was able to learn more about the man he was about to operate upon.

He recognized Jovy's pressure, ambition and faith in Ves. He also became exposed to a portion of Jovy's mindset and perspective.

Just as Ves looked at reality as a space filled with many different forms of life that interacted with each other, Jovy saw everything around him as a constant progression of probabilistic events.

It was quite a dazzling and confusing approach to reality to Ves. To Jovy, every phenomenon in existence could be reduced to a series of probabilistic equations!

Nothing was impossible to Jovy!

Nothing was 100 percent certain to Jovy!

From an instance as small as the atomic decay of a radioactive isotope to an event as large as a dying star that could go supernova at any moment, everything could be calculated and quantified in terms of probabilities!

Though it was natural to think this way towards inherently probabilistic subjects such as buying a lottery ticket, Jovy's uniqueness was that he applied it to everything, even concepts that weren't associated with probabilities in the first place.

Even life itself wasn't anything special to the Reality Trickster!

Whereas Ves made clear distinctions between life and the absence of life, Jovy did not make any special distinctions with regards to the former.

Living organisms such as other humans were merely products of lots of probabilistic events. The more he understood the past probabilities that defined one's life, the better he was able to calculate the probabilities of that person's future actions and decisions!

In short, reality was all a product of math of Jovy. Percentages constantly filled his vision as long as he remained conscious.

This could drive any ordinary person mad, but all of it came natural to Jovy due to his intense studies along with forming a design seed that encapsulated his design philosophy!

It was quite amazing to Ves to see and understand how a Journeyman like Jovy actually worked. Gaining the opportunity to observe the distinct and unique spiritual and mental

traits of a talented and promising MTA mech designer allowed him to collect a lot of interesting data points that could prove some of his theories while generating new ones as well!

"Uhm, Ves, are you going to start anytime soon? All you have been doing so far is staring at my inner self. Don't forget about the reason why we have invited you to this operating theater."

Ves blinked. "Ahem. My apologies. I need to possess at least a basic understanding of how your mind is set up before I start my operation. I've already learned what I needed to know to begin the operation. Get ready for real this time."

As much as he wanted to continue to study the intricacies of Jovy's mind, this was not a time for him to indulge in his curiosity.

The faint domain field exuded by a nearby ace pilot that was interfacing with an ace mech constantly made Ves feel as if all of his actions were exposed.

He couldn't afford to fool around at this time!

"Let's go, Blinky."

Mrow!

Blinky took the lead with performing the steps needed to impart Jovy with a companion spirit.

Ves had drafted this plan a long time ago and none of the steps were anything new or dangerous.

The only point of uncertainty was that he was unable to determine what exactly Jovy's companion spirit would turn into. This was because Ves was not too familiar with Jovy's main spiritual attributes as of yet. It was only when Blinky began to carve out a portion of Jovy's spirituality that he truly got in touch with the concept known as probability!

As much as Ves felt tempted to smuggle a small spiritual fragment for his own use, he resisted this foolish urge and immediately directed Blinky to combine Jovy's exposed spirituality with the spiritual ingredients he brought.

The process went fairly smoothly and Blinky did not encounter any serious hindrances or surprises when he merged the ingredients and shaped Jovy's new companion spirit.

Just as promised, Ves formed it into the shape of an eyeball. It might not be the cutest form of companion spirit that he had made, but if Jovy wanted to anthropomorphize his other self, then he could do so by directing his spiritual pet's growth.

The eyeball was just the starting point.

Due to its relatively simple shape, Blinky easily managed to form it out of numerous different spiritual shards.

None of the ingredients that Ves had chosen were particularly difficult or dangerous to work with. Their attributes also got along with each other rather well.

The principal ingredient was Ylvaine's spiritual fragment. This was the main driver of Jovy's new companion spirit and it was absolutely essential that it passed on at least a portion of its predictive potential!

Ves wasn't sure how effective the new companion spirit would be because he did not harvest a particularly large spiritual fragment from Ylvaine this time.

Just like Helena had warned a week ago, the humanoid design spirit wasn't earning a lot of spiritual feedback these days, so its growth was extremely limited.

The Illustrious One was a bit better off in that regard. Not only was he tied to multiple mech designs, he also received high-quality spiritual feedback from an expert pilot such as Venerable Davia Stark.

Despite being able to harvest a larger spiritual fragment from the Illustrious One, Ves only collected a minute amount from him because he did not feel the need to add too much of the alien design spirit to the mix.

Ves only chose to add a tiny portion of the Illustrious One to Jovy's companion spirit in the hopes of empowering the companion spirit's observation capabilities.

Though Jovy instructed Ves to only utilize spiritual ingredients derived from human design spirits, Ves felt that this addition made so much sense that he added a tiny spiritual fragment from the luminar design spirit anyway!

"It's just a tiny add-on. It's not that big of a deal."

Ves believed so much in this theory that he bet that he could probably get away with it. Seeing that the hidden ace pilot did not intervene, it was probably okay!

He did not want the companion spirit to develop a new ability related to light at the cost of weakening its predictive capabilities.

As Ves supervised and assisted Blinky's efforts to shape the new companion spirit, he intuitively felt that everything was proceeding as planned.

No surprises occurred so far which was exactly what he was aiming for. Before he knew it, Blinky was done with completing the shape of the companion spirit.

Already, it was coming to life after the spiritual energy provided by Ves himself formed the spark of life that fully granted this partially-separated aspect of Jovy a new and independent consciousness!

"Nghhh!"

Jovy had remained remarkably stable throughout this process, but when his new spiritual eye finally came to life, he finally made a sound!

"Hang on, Jovy. You're doing well. We have already reached the final step. Don't reject whatever it is you are experiencing. Accept your new companion spirit and embrace this new part of yourself!"

Blinky pulled out of Jovy's head after he had completed his tasks. The spiritual cat remained vigilant in case anything went wrong.

Mrow.

"I know."

Though Ves and Blinky had done everything correctly, they still remained a bit nervous as they waited for the new companion spirit to come into existence.

After a dozen seconds of waiting, the spiritual eye finally came to life!

The new companion spirit instantly gained clarity and understood the nature of its own existence!

Jovy's pain and discomfort had largely disappeared at this time now that Ves and Blinky were not tinkering inside his head. Though he still felt a dull throbbing inside his head, the addition of a brand-new companion spirit completely attracted his attention.

As the two separated parts of Jovy familiarized with each other, they quickly accepted and embraced each other.

"Being able to see probabilities is already a useful ability." Jovy slowly said as he explored what his new companion spirit could do. "If I can combine that with the ability to see the future, then what I can do no longer be described as probability manipulation."

Jovy turned his head towards Ves. "Do you know what it means if I can see the probabilities of the present but also their outcomes in the future?"

"Uhhmm, not really."

"It means that I have mastered the power of destiny." Jovy answered with glinting eyes. "With my new Eye of Providence, I will no longer be subject to the whims of luck and random chance!"

Those were big words! Ves was impressed by Jovy's hubris. That didn't mean he was convinced.

The so-called Eye of Providence might have the power to glimpse the future, but nothing came for free!

Since Ves hadn't artificially accelerated the Eye of Providence's growth process, it was stuck in a weak and immature state.

It hardly had any time to grow and come into its power. How could it possibly start providing Jovy with the answers of the future right away?

Ves predicted that it would probably take months of growth before Jovy could truly attempt his first glimpse of the future!

Chapter 4040 The Eye of Providence

Jovy had clearly lost a bit of his self-control after Ves and Blinky concluded the operation.

This was not a surprise. Jovy not only gained a new companion spirit that provided a second perspective, but also experienced a considerable boost to his spiritual strength due to absorbing several foreign spiritual ingredients!

Ves could already feel that the ace pilot hidden in the background had grown more concerned at Jovy's irrational behavior.

The domain field that engulfed the operating theater had grown a little stronger as the ace pilot openly probed Jovy's new state.

That quickly snapped the MTA Journeyman out of his euphoric state.

A bit of color showed on his cheeks as Jovy realized how much he embarrassed himself in a procedure that was bound to be studied by many different experts and officials!

Ves didn't care about Jovy's overreaction to obtaining a new companion spirit. Anyone who gained an upgrade to his spirit would feel just as happy if not more.

Right now, Ves needed to make sure that the birth of the Eye of Providence did not impose any serious negative effects on Jovy.

It would be bad if he and Blinky had overlooked a detail that could pose a serious threat to the recipient's health and sanity!

Ves briefly turned and glanced at the projected health readings. Though he possessed little understanding on what the numbers and graphs actually meant, much of them were portrayed in a healthy shade of green, which meant that Jovy's physiological state was still in good shape.

Only a few sensor readings that corresponded to stress, brain activity and mental strain had dipped into yellow territory. This was of little concern to Ves as this was already an expected outcome.

"How are you feeling right now, Jovy?" Ves asked. "Don't think too much. Just tell me what is on your mind."

"There is an ache in my head that isn't going away. It's as if you have drilled a hole in my brain. Is this normal?"

Ves nodded. "It is not too unusual. It will go away after a good night's rest. Maybe you will need to sleep for multiple days to remedy the aching and sense of exhaustion in your mind. What about your companion spirit? Can you feel the new you? Can you touch its mind and assume direct control over it? If there is any instance where your new companion spirit is resisting influence, you should say so immediately."

Jovy furrowed his brows as he exerted his concentration on doing what Ves had just said.

Manipulating a companion spirit was like moving around a new limb that a crazy scientist had just grafted onto a person's body. It took a bit of time to get used to the new possibilities, but there was nothing complicated about them. The recipient just had to get accustomed to utilizing the mind to interact with the new addition to his mind.

A mech designer as smart as Jovy quickly got the hang of the basic operations that he could perform with a companion spirit.

Over the course of fifteen minutes, he tested and displayed basic proficiency in many of the same operations that Ves could perform on Blinky.

From communicating with his companion spirit to directing it to move as far as the Eye of Providence could reach, Jovy became fascinated by each and every new possibility.

The real highlight of this show was when Jovy essentially took over his companion spirit and viewed reality from the perspective of a spiritual entity that had the potential to see the threads of future!

Ves intuitively sensed that his Spirituality was being observed by an existence other than the ace pilot guarding in the dark!

"You can see?"

"I do." Jovy whispered as all three of his eyes stared at Ves in wonder. "I never knew... how much I was missing out. I never realized I was missing out on another layer of reality until now. I can see much more than before. Everything makes more sense now that my Eye of Providence has finally taken shape."

"What do I look like to you, Jovy? Give me a description."

"I can see... the energies in your head. They're strong. I can see your own companion spirit as well. Both of you are filled with life that makes me feel close and comfortable. The Eye of Providence instinctively knows that you are its creator. I... can also see something else that doesn't look as if it belongs in your mind. Is that... from another mech designer?"

Jovy must have been referring to Gloriana's dormant spiritual fragment. Ves casually waved the issue away.

"What you can see, I can see as well." Ves remarked. "What you have described so far is the perception that entities like your companion spirit inherently possess. After all, your Eye of Providence is made up of psionic power, so how can it be blind to this form of energy? However, your companion spirit should also come with its own abilities. I'm not certain whether your intangible pet can activate any of its inherent abilities at this time."

Jovy frowned. "You designed my companion. Don't you know what your own work can do, Ves?"

"It's complicated. Your companion spirit is not a static machine that is made with precision and performs exactly according to design. It is a living entity that has already grown and evolved beyond its initial parameters from the moment it sparked to life. Right now, the deviations to my original design shouldn't be too great, but even I will not know how it works and what it can do after it grows up in the future."

"Interesting."

Under Ves' direction, Jovy attempted to explore and access any unique abilities the Eye of Providence might possess at this time.

This did not go smoothly. Ves became more convinced that the Eye of Providence was too weak and immature to support an ability as powerful as gleaning the events of the future!

"I think... I can vaguely recognize what you have described." Jovy spoke as his brows furrowed deeper.

He experimented a bit more and eventually came up with the idea of placing the Eye of Providence on his forehead.

As soon as he did so, all three of his eyes seemed to go into sync. After achieving a mysterious state of resonance and harmonization, he directed it towards the first clear subject that he could view from his position on the operation table, which happened to be the person responsible for providing with this new power!

Ves looked fascinated at how the Eye of Providence was able to merge and go into sync with Jovy so easily after it settled onto the mech designer's forehead.

He suddenly became a bit shocked when he sensed increasing activity from the companion spirit. It was becoming more and more active as the Eye of Providence as well as Jovy himself attempted to Ves' future.

This quickly went wrong as Jovy suddenly screamed in pain!

"Ahhh! It hurts!"

Despite his light sedation, Jovy couldn't help but scream and hold his head in pain!

His new companion spirit also exhibited signs of distress as it forcibly dislodged itself from Jovy's forehead and bounced around like a ball that had gone out of control!

The hidden ace pilot's domain field became a lot more active all of a sudden. Ves felt an invisible force of will imposing its strength on his mind, forcing him to take a few steps backwards!

The surrounding medical specialists all became more concerned and tried their best to relieve whatever suffering Jovy was going through. They studied the worsening life sign readings and injected the subject's body with additional sedatives and substances that were designed to counteract mental pain.

Whether the responses worked or not, Jovy slowly calmed down after ten or so minutes.

"Ugh."

"Do you know what happened that caused you to suffer so much?" Ves asked.

"I do." Jovy said as he had regained enough control to sit up from the operating table. He rubbed his head as if it was still ringing. "I don't know what came over me exactly, but when I achieved that wonderful state, I had the illusion that I could derive and read anyone's fate. When I set my sights on you..."

"You attempted to perform a task that you were not strong enough to fulfill."

Jovy depreciatingly smiled. "Right. That is as good a description as any. It is only now that I found out that there is a cost to obtain this information. As soon as my Eye of Providence started to work on you, it was as if I was a third-class mech attempting to defeat a first-class mech. Your destiny or whatever you want to call it is too great! You have affected a huge amount of people with your work and you will continue to affect even more individuals in the future. The amount of probabilities that encompasses is such an enormous number that I have a hunch that not even all of the supercomputers in the Red Ocean can fully perform all of the calculations to read your future. At the very least, my Eye of Providence is far too young and weak to get close to accomplishing this feat."

Ves thought as much. This was similar to what Ylvaine conveyed to him whenever he requested the design spirit to give him a future prediction.

It cost energy to read the future!

James Ylvaine had sacrificed his life to give Ves and the Larkinsons the answers they needed.

If Jovy attempted to perform the same feat, then he and his Eye of Providence would fare no better!

"The power that I have granted you has a huge amount of potential, but that also means that you need to pay much more attention to wielding it." Ves warned his friend. "Don't expect to achieve instant results with your companion spirit. It needs to undergo a lot of growth and exercise in order to read the futures of greater and more significant subjects. For now, I suggest you start with exploring what you can do on relatively small and simple objects. Do you understand what I am suggesting?"

Jovy slowly nodded. "I do. Start with studying smaller objects and slowly work my way up. Do you have an idea on how long it takes before I can make meaningful use of this ability for my work?"

"It might take several years for your Eye of Providence to become potent enough to read the destinies of ordinary people." Ves guessed.

"That... is a considerably longer period than I expected."

"The wait is worth it, Jovy. I could have given you another companion spirit that you could immediately make use of, but that means that you have missed out on a capability that is not only more powerful, but also a lot more relevant to your design philosophy. Do you regret your decision to go for the Eye of Providence instead of the alternatives that I have presented?"

Jovy did not take long to voice his answer.

"No. The Eye of Providence is worth it even if I have to wait for a decade or even a century for it to be useful. Compared to my peers and the other mech designers in the MTA, no one possesses an advantage as unique and special as a companion spirit. Besides, I do not need to utilize its most costly ability at first in order to make good use of it. I can already observe so many new aspects of reality that I can already think of potential new applications of my design philosophy!"

In the end, all was well. Jovy underwent a thorough health inspection and showed that he was healthy and sober enough to prove that his life was not at risk.

The MTA did not assume that everything was alright, though. The medical specialists all wanted to keep Jovy under long-term observation in order to confirm that not a single part of him was out of place!

"You heard the doctors. I will be out of touch for several weeks or several months." Jovy helplessly said as Ves was ready to be transported back to his flagship. "You probably won't be able to contact me for some time. The Simile Halifax will continue to stay in your fleet for a time, so don't worry about it. I will contact you again when the researchers who have shown an interest in studying my new condition are satisfied with what they have learned."

Ves nodded in understanding. "Good luck, then. Just remember not to stare into the fates of any big guys. Start with ordinary space peasants. Their lives are so inconsequential that it takes much fewer calculations to read their futures."

"Oh, I know."

Before Ves was ready to go, he suddenly grew curious and asked another question.

"In your abortive attempt to read my future, did you manage to catch any clues?"

Jovy slowly frowned. "I think I managed to obtain... fragments, but it is like receiving a few seconds of corrupted footage. What little I have obtained doesn't make much sense to me. If I have to describe my impression from what I have obtained, then..."

"Then?"

"Life and death are deeply intertwined in your future. You cause so much of both that it is as if they are stalking you with each step of the way."

"...That's all?"