

Chapter 771 Born to Lead

Major Verle and Ves moved quietly through the corridor. Owing to the mech officer's rank, all of the Vandals passing through the corridors all acknowledged the major in some manner.

Ves studied the minor rituals from the side. Each Vandal, no matter how crisp or sloppy they behaved, expressed their respect to Major Verle in some manner. The man had earned their genuine respect.

Yet did all of his efforts mean nothing compared to the prestige of an expert pilot?

Neither of them knew quite what to make of the last battle. While they survived against a sandman onslaught at close range with fairly light casualties, Venerable Xie threw his Parallax Star under an unnecessary amount of risk.

Right now, the Flagrant Swordmaidens began to process the aftermath of the battle. Some mechs managed to get eaten by the sandmen, but most managed to survive by staying out of melee range.

The only downside was that arming so many mechs with spare ballistic rifles expended huge amounts of ammunition. Their logistics ships already started churning out more shells and kinetic projectiles to make up for the unexpected shortfall.

If they met the sandmen once, they might very well encounter them again! Ves didn't think it was a coincidence that the sandmen managed to intercept them in the middle of interplanetary space. The odds of bumping into each other when visibility was down to a hundred kilometers was too miniscule to count.

The sandmen must have possessed some other means of detecting a fleet at longer ranges!

"Mr. Larkinson."

"Yes, sir?"

"What do you think about the sandmen presence in the Aeon Corona System?" The major idly asked. As they walked through the passageways, they obviously couldn't discuss anything sensitive.

"I'm not an exobiologist or an astrophysicist, sir." Ves immediately responded with a disclaimer. "That said, in my inexpert opinion, we are knee-deep inside the core territory of the sandmen empire. They must have lived beside the Aeon Corona System for decades probably. I think that even if the spacetime storm that surrounds the system manages to block a million attempts at forcing an entry, the sandmen may have succeeded on the millionth-and-first try through sheer luck. I think that's one of the ways in which they can force an entry without possessing a key."

"If that's true, the sandmen may have thrown away enough fleets to conquer the Komodo Star Sector and more. That's not the most efficient allocation of resources."

"That's why I don't take much stock in this theory, sir. Perhaps the sandmen have calculated a way to enter the system without being thrown off course. Perhaps they utilize a different means of FTL that doesn't subject them to the vagaries of gravitic turbulence. I don't know, though I think we should be prepared to face more sandmen as we get nearer to Aeon Corona VII. Something must have attracted them to this star system, and I think the planet and the Starlight Megalodon may seem attractive to the sandmen as well."

Just the endlessly renewable power reactor should be enough to make the sandmen ruling caste release their race's equivalent of drool, not to mention the other wondrous technologies the battleship may have utilized.

Verle grunted in a dissatisfied manner. "Our performance against a twelve-escort sandman fleet has been exceptionally poor. In your opinion, is our spaceborn mech roster adequately equipped to defend our fleet?"

Ves didn't know why the major asked such an open-ended question to him. "Sir, with regards to our mechs, they are more than adequate to repel a sandmen fleet of the same strength. The only reasons why we dropped the ball in the last battle was that despite our drills and contingency plans, no one really expected the sandmen to actually show up out of the blue. In addition, we haven't fully adjusted our strategy and tactics to cope with the properties of the astral winds. These strenuous environmental conditions massively favor the sandmen."

A twelve-escort sandmen fleet may be an absolute menace to the average pirate gang or mercenary corps, but the Flagrant Vandals could have easily chewed them if they encountered the aliens under normal circumstances.

In regular spaceborn combat, the great distances involved usually gave a force plenty of warning once a sandman fleet moved to intercept them. This enabled the human defenders to make plenty of preparations and bombard the sandmen from a distance, chewing them up before they ever reached close enough to engulf the yummy ships and mechs!

All of this became impossible when their sensors could barely peer through the higher-dimensional particles. Like a mist or smokescreen engulfing a terrestrial battlefield, those who entered such a region devolved into savages.

"You are correct." Verle finally replied. "I have been hesitant in deploying our patrols further away from the main fleet in fear of losing touch of them, but it

has become clear that such a cautious approach will only render us vulnerable to a repeat of the last battle. It is not your fault nor the fault of the mechs that we have been pushed to the brink of defeat. The way we employ our gear is more important than their properties."

"Major, if I may ask. Why are you telling me this?" Ves asked. "I'm not a Vandal nor a military officer."

The man smiled sardonically. "It is exactly because you're an outsider that I feel at ease with my rambles. You aren't restrained in expressing your opinions. Besides, I feel you are a man of ambition. As a leader in your own right in the civilian world, there is a kinship between you and me. You possess an awareness of matters that is far above the other Vandals. Do you think Captain Orfan is as contemplative and "

"Definitely not, sir." Ves immediately replied. He felt no compulsion in demonstrating his contempt to the female mech captain. "The good captain may be a great warrior, but she is not as attentive when it comes to her other responsibilities."

The mech officer snorted. "I know what you mean. However, the reality of running a large mech regiment that easily numbers in the tens of thousands is that there are way too many leadership positions but not enough talents to fill them up. Compromises have to be made."

The mech officer proceeded to ramble a bit about how to select good leaders and how to deal with an absence of capable leaders. Ves felt as if Major Verle wanted to vent but couldn't really let down his guard to anyone but him. He particularly took note of the use of the word kinship.

The Skull Architect once mentioned several times that they were kindred. For Major Verle to tie them together in a similar fashion with the word kinship meant that the man saw Ves as a person of the same vein.

Ves felt flattered, though he recognized that he would never have as good of a human touch as the likes of Major Verle or Chief Haine. His failure to integrate with the Flagrant Vandals and his preference for delegation showed that Ves naturally gravitated to a more imperious style of leadership.

The pair reached the shuttle bay before he could contemplate the matter further, and Ves threw the issue of leadership out of his mind for the moment. Right now, he looked forward to obtaining a close glimpse at the remains of a high-class sandman leader!

"Are you familiar with sandmen crystallizations, Mr. Larkinson?"

"I've studied the sandmen before, sir." Ves nodded. "The sandmen bodies consist of sandgrain-sized substances that are animated through an energy construct that is either the source or an effect of their consciousness. When an individual sandman dies, the energy construct disappears but their physical bodies remain. The lowest caste of sandmen often utilize literal grains of sand, hence their name, but the higher castes adopt higher-quality materials as their base. Their leaders often blend a variety of precious exotics into a single solid crystal."

"Correct. These crystallized remains are the only objects of value that we can retrieve from a sandman force. Most of the time, the earnings from selling them won't compensate for the losses incurred by fighting the sandmen. Fighting them is a thankless job."

The two finally reached the shuttle that had recently gone out to pick up the sandman admiral's crystallization. Two security officers escorted a pair of exobiologists followed by a floating protective case. The transparent sides of the case showed off a small, finger-sized crystal shaded in red.

This tiny crystal used to be the center of a governing intelligence of a spaceborn sandman fleet! Ves stared at the strangely reflective crystal with

great fascination. Though he sensed nothing spiritual or anything else that signified the crystal used to be alive, it nevertheless possessed an attractive luster that made for a great jewel.

To be honest, the red remains reminded him of Lucky's crystals. Did they share the same properties?

"The sources I've consulted never mention the use of these crystallization." Ves remarked as he stood up after having his fill of staring at the curiosity. "All the articles only tell their readers that the CFA pay a good price for the intact crystallizations of the sandmen ruling castes."

"It's no surprise they do so." The male exobiologist garbed in a hazard suit replied. "The sandmen ruling caste are born to lead. They are more intelligent on their own and have the ability to strengthen their cognition by drawing upon the spare thinking capacity of their subjects. You can say that they exhibit traits of both sentients and processors at the same time."

The other exobiologist, a woman, piped in as well. "The reason why the CFA is eager to acquire the crystals while the MTA show no interest is because of one of their philosophical disagreements. The Common Fleet Alliance mainly operate warships, which are huge, complex vessels that are run by huge crews. However, these warships are far too large and complex to be directed by human crew alone. By necessity, they rely highly on automation in order to help keep their ships running without relying on an excessive amount of spacers."

Ves frowned at that. "What does that have to do with the sandmen?"

"Well, a potential sandman leader has the ability to think similar to a human while possessing the ability to connect to as much hardware as possible to increase their raw capabilities. Don't you think that makes for a great AI core?"

"That's only a rumor." The male exobiologist retorted. "I doubt that the mighty Common Fleet Alliance will deign to repurpose the remains of a marginal alien race as an AI core of all things. Perhaps they are studying the crystallizations to advance their automation technology, but it's crazy to say that they are putting literal alien carcasses to use as the center of their operating systems!"

Verle held out his armored hand, halting the argument between the two exobiologists. "Inspect the crystallization for any lingering threats and learn what you can out of it. Once you are done, stow the remains in our vault. Don't scratch it. We can still earn a decent amount of money once we pass it over to the CFA."

Once the exobiologists and their escorts brought their encased loot out of the shuttle bay, Ves and Major Verle returned all the way to his stateroom. After they arrived, Ves activated his signal jammer before they began their long-awaited discussion.

"Alright, Mr. Larkinson, enough dilly-dallying around. Tell me what is going on with our good expert pilot. His insubordination is far outside the pale. According to the personality profiles my men have constructed, Venerable Xie would never dare to disobey a direct order from the Fourth Prince. Are the changes working or not?"

"I don't know." Ves simply replied. "I'm not a neuroscientist or a psychologist. My expertise lies in mechs. I think you are able to tell me more about mech pilots than myself. All I can say is that according to the telemetry I've observed from the Parallax Star in action, the changes I've made should have caught on. Venerable Xie may not have lost his loyalty to the Fourth Prince, but his newfound adoration for the Flagrant Vandals should have surpassed his prior feelings."

This was the most insidious part about the code that Ves had cribbed from Farund Inc. The company's much-maligned programming enabled them to subvert their victims with almost no resistance!

It should have worked perfectly if Ves understood the entire code and copied more than a couple of fragments, but alas he didn't have the time or capability to do so. His haste and sloppiness in the implementation had bitten him back this time!

Chapter 772 Aeon Corona VII

After twenty minutes of exchanging half-baked theories, unsupported arguments and baseless speculation, they came no closer to explaining what went on with Venerable Xie and his cavalier behavior in the last battle.

"Enough!" Major Verle let out an outburst. "It is obvious that neither of us lack the expertise to judge the actual outcome of your work. I will have my men keep an eye on the subordinate and make an attempt to read his thoughts from his actions. For what is worth, I believe you when you state your changes has achieved at least something. Venerable Xie has not made a single attempt to contact the Fourth Prince, thereby continuing the ruse where he's still alive."

The death of Prince Hixt-Klaaster was a very regrettable matter to them both. If that Acolyte in the service of the Church of Haatumak hadn't been shrewd enough to target the prince, then Ves wouldn't have been compelled to break a great taboo and tamper the neural interfaces of an expert pilot.

"There is a chance that Venerable Xie is merely pretending that he has lost interest in catching up to the Fourth Prince." Ves couldn't help but add.

"There you go again." Major Verle shook his head in a tired manner. "You are full of guesses, but what is the point of answering so many questions? Without proof, none of your assertions can be taken as the truth. Still, I'll assign more men as a precaution."

After discussing a few other matters, Ves left the stateroom and went to his office to take care of paperwork that piled up after every major battle. The fleet stood down from red alert but maintained yellow alert in case the sandmen fleet brought friends.

Sand and sand-like particles drifted into the astral winds as soon as the battle had ended. Nothing remained of their enemies and the handful of mechs they managed to engulfed. Any mech that ended in their clutches would have been broken down as the sand pressed down on their frames from all sides until they finally broke into fragments.

Unless a mech was rescued in the first couple of seconds, they never came back intact. Despite the somewhat primitive way the sandmen fought, they utilized their unique properties to great advantage.

Ves looked at the final tally and saw that the Flagrant Vandals lost another ten mechs due to the initial ambush and various mishaps during the spontaneous battle. Most of their mech pilots ejected in time and survived, fortunately, but the fleet didn't carry enough spare mechs to put them to use.

For now, the mech pilots who lost their own mechs had to be benched and put on reserve.

He contemplated whether to request the logistics ships to fabricate a bunch of cheap mechs to put these pilots back into action, but he rejected this option in the end.

"It's going to take way too many resources to fabricate completely new mechs. We need those resources for repairs and other purposes."

He processed other matters that came to his desk. Some of the combat carriers almost emptied out their ammunition reserves, prompting Ves to place an order to replenish them. The logistics ships already had their hands full for

the next week as they accessed their store of bulk materials to fabricate cheap, low-quality rounds and shells to replenish their ammunition stockpile.

The low-quality rounds wouldn't be as damaging or reliable than the commercially-manufactured ammunition, but Vse would rather have an abundance of low-quality rounds than a limited selection of higher-quality ammunition.

"At this rate, our stores of bulk materials will be consumed. We really have to seek out some asteroid or moons to mine or else our guns don't have anything to fire anymore after winning a couple of skirmishes against the sandmen."

The presence of the sandmen hung over everyone's head like the Sword of Damocles. No one knew another sword took the place of the old one and threatened to hack off their heads.

Such a nightmare scenario frightened Ves quite badly because he was more aware of the state of the fleet than the average Vandal.

Even though the Flagrant Vandals dragged a considerable supply train long, most of them consisted of transports and cargo haulers that carried a large but finite amount of resources. Once they tapped out their stockpile, their supply situation would really start to crater.

Naturally, this only applied to the Vandals. Lydia's Swordmaidens may have brought their own supply train, but their depth and breath of resources couldn't match the preparations of their allies.

While Ves did not have exact figures in possession, his casual interrogation of Ketis revealed that they would likely run out of bulk resources when the Vandals only expended a third of their own bulk stockpiles.

In short, if the Vandals really needed to find an asteroid field or a moon to stabilize their increasingly precarious supply situation.

"Fortunately, physical ammunition is only useful for our spaceborn situation."

The Vandals did not plan on deploying any mechs that relied solely on ballistic weapons on the ground. Even Venerable Xie's Pale Dancer would have to exchange its trusty ballistic rifle with a customized laser rifle that Miss Lisbeth and Chief Keys originally fabricated for the Parallax Star. The weapon had collected dust for years, and would finally see some use after undergoing modifications to make it more compatible to the Pale Dancer.

A few hours went by as the Flagrant Swordmaidens finally recovered from their previous ordeal. After a brief round of servicing, the mechs assigned to patrol the fleet launched into space and began to form a single chain of mechs that extended outwards in each direction.

The detection envelope reached as much as eight-hundred kilometers from each direction! Such a distance granted the fleet a lot more minutes of vital preparation time.

The daisy-chain of mechs also allowed them to transmit targeting data for the artillery mechs safely ensconced in the bunkers along the hulls of the combat carriers they rode with. The Akkaras possessed the heaviest weight of fire and therefore played a principal role in the defence against any other sandmen fleet that might emerge.

Despite their caution and their heightened vigilance, the Flagrant Swordmaidens encountered neither sandmen or pirates as they took an astonishing amount of time to reach the vicinity of Aeon Corona VII.

As the fleet arrived in high orbit above the massive Super Earth, more details emerged from their observations. Major Verle called for a conference meeting in order to discuss their findings.

Ves sat in the side alongside Chief Haine and Chief Avanaeon while the mech officers sat on the other side of the compartment. Projections of Vandals

stationed on the other ships emerged and filled up the conference room to bursting.

Yet despite the potential hubbub that could have emerged from gathering so many Vandals together, no one spoke a word. Now that they finally came within reach of their mission, everyone wanted to get it over with. Everyone had already heard scattered snippets of disturbing information on Aeon Corona VII, so each of them desired clarity at this point!

"Ladies and gentlemen, I'll skip the pleasantries in order to tell you the facts. The longer we spend on discussions, the longer our potential rivals can implement their own plans. In the interest of time, please keep your questions short."

With that out of the way, Major Verle made a gesture in the air that caused the central projection to flare to life. A live, scaled-down projection of Aeon Corona VII spun in front of everyone attending the meeting.

"Aeon Corona VII. The preliminary information we have obtained largely checks out. This planet is a Super Earth that is several times the size and mass of Old Earth. However, it is also significantly less dense, so its average gravity on the ground amounts to six times the gravity of Old Earth."

That caused many of the mech officers and support staff assigned on the ground to become a little discomforted. The difference between five and six g's was fairly significant.

"Now, let us discuss the first major observation we have made on our most sensitive sensors." The major gestured to the massive globe. "Aeon Corona VII used to be a life-bearing exoplanet with its own fully-developed biodiversity that has adapted to its heavy gravity. However, the arrival of the Starlight Megalodon changed all of that. The signs of light terraforming is very evident to us. Not only has the planet's atmosphere been adjusted to allow humans to

breathe the air without filters or air cyclers, much of the lush flora consists of Old Earth strains modified to withstand heavy gravity."

The projection zoomed in on a particular location on the planet. Through the heavy distortion and interference, those present spotted a definite pattern to the astral winds.

"The astral winds are spreading from those coordinates! Is that... the Starlight Megalodon?"

"We have a forty percent certainty that this is indeed the crash site of the Starlight Megalodon." Major Verle confirmed, causing a wave of awe and gasps to ripple throughout the Vandal officers. "However, the high concentration of astral winds make it impossible for our sensors to reach the ground level and confirm our suspicions. For now, we will presume that the Starlight Megalodon can be found at these coordinates unless proven wrong."

"Sir, what about the survivors?" Captain Orfan spoke up. Her projection dithered a tiny bit due to the astral wind flowing between their ships. "We heard there are human settlements on the planet! Are the rumors true?!"

The major threw an annoyed glance at the brash mech captain. Trust her to speak out of turn just to satisfy her curiosity.

"The rumors have some merit behind them for once." The Major coughed. The projection zoomed back out of the blinding volcano of yellow-orange particles and zoomed towards the other side of the planet. The astral winds and the interference wasn't nearly as bad here, enabling the Vandals to take snapshots of the surface. Interspersed between the lush green arboreal regions, deep blue oceans and arid desert terrain, a handful of points lit up. As the projection of the planet zoomed in, they identified a vague but distinctive shape of artificial construction!"

"That's... a city!"

It wasn't the only city. The projection panned from city to city, eventually putting the total count of identified settlements past twenty.

The projection then halted on the biggest city, which was coincidentally situated on the opposite side of the planet to the presumed crash site of the Starlight Megalodon.

"All of these cities are surrounded by an energy field that makes it hard to identify their properties. However, our specialists have derived a lot of conclusions from their studies. First, they are definitely of human construction. The technology and architecture that we have managed to glean from our observations has given us a high confidence that the inhabitants of the city are the descendents of the original crew of the Starlight Megalodon."

Due to earlier revelations, this didn't prompt a lot of shock from the Vandals. One of them raised his hand though.

"How are they able to live on Aeon Corona VII without getting crushed by the gravity, sir? I would think that most babies will get crushed before they finish developing!"

"That is why we believe the energy field that surrounds the cities is somehow able to mitigate the heavy gravity. Within the range of this field, the gravity experienced by those inside is likely to be close to standard gravity!" The major exclaimed.

That was a very significant technological achievement if that were true!

"Second, might I remind you that time passes faster on the surface of the planet than in the outside galaxy." He continued. "The humans stranded on Aeon Corona VII have lived through several thousand years of trying to eke out an existence on this unfriendly planet! That is more than enough time for them to undergo radical adjustments in their culture and society! For all we know, they have completely forgotten their roots and gone native!"

If that was true, then this represented a shocking outcome! After several thousands of years of isolation, would the survivors even be aware of the majesty of what their ancestors were once part of? Or had they devolved into a fractured, tribal society where the CFA had faded into myth and legend?

Chapter 773 Contentious Briefing

How could human life develop on a Super Earth?

The exobiologists present in the meeting provided two of the simplest answers.

"The most prevalent case among humanity is through the use of technology." One of them explained. "Artificial gravity and antigrav is well-understood by our race. The Common Fleet Alliance utilize this branch of technology widely in their warships, from providing a constant source of artificial gravity to incorporating inertial dampeners to prevent every spacer from splattering against the bulkheads if the battleship accelerates or decelerates. While I am not an expert in this field, I understand that many engineers are highly proficient in this area."

Chief Avanaeon nodded. "That is true. Mastering grav tech is one of the basic achievements along with understanding FTL drive tech that enabled our race to thrive among the stars. The basics of grav tech isn't very complicated, and any seasoned engineer can build an antigrav module that's strong enough to resist a few g's of force. I can imagine that the CFA's galaxy-class engineers aboard one of their prestigious battleships can do more with grav tech than every engineer in the Mech Corps combined."

This likely explained the invisible field that emanated around the cities vaguely visible from orbit. If the descendants of the survivors of the Starlight Megalodon inherited anything from the original crew, learning how to deal with the crushing gravity was probably on the top of their list!

Another exobiologist took over. "The other, more permanent possibility is through genetic modification. Humans optimized to live on planets exhibiting different gravity conditions aren't anything new. While terraforming may allow us to transform a planet's air and ecosystem to be more compatible to our race, there are no easy solutions when it comes to compensating for the gravity. Spreading antigrav modules is a costly and uneconomic solution. Rather than sustain an extensive network of antigrav fields, why not modify a baseline human into a variant that is capable of surviving crushing gravity without any further maintenance?"

"Would the Starlight Megalodon be capable of genetically modifying their existing crew into high-g humans?" Someone asked.

"Absolutely. A CFA battleship is one of our most mightiest weapons. They are built like cities and offer almost every range of service. Gene labs will certainly be present. The question is whether they have survived intact upon the crash and whether the genetically modified humans are limited in some other ways. High-g variant humans gain an enormous amount of strength, but their appetite for calories has increased in the same proportion. If the survivors and descendants aren't able to obtain enough food, I doubt they can sustain more than a small community at a time."

These days, a wealthy human could find a grey or black market gene lab and undergo cheap procedures to increase their attributes. They could choose to become stronger, faster, more intelligent and more, all by undergoing simple gene treatments.

Of course, these accessible, largely unregulated gene treatments often led to drastic changes in appearance in addition to other severe side effects. The price always surpassed the benefits.

The gene patterns for high-g variant humans had been developed and popularized long ago, making them fairly well-understood and accepted. While

they did in fact produce physically strong variant humans, they always turned out to eat at least five to ten times more than baseline humans!

If every baseline human in the galaxy changed into variant species, humanity would starve!

"Which of the two cases apply?" Major Verle asked.

"Certainly the first one, sir. The cities may not be numerous and are separated from each other by thousands of kilometers, but their size and apparent development show that they are permanent and well-established fixtures, each of them large enough to host a self-sustaining population that won't lose out to a large city in the Bright Republic."

The other exobiologist added a caveat. "That does not rule out the other case as well. While we have detected no smaller settlements that aren't covered by an antigrav field, it may be possible that their settlements are camouflaged or hidden underground. There are limits to what we can observe in orbit, especially through the spacetime distortion that only grows worse at lower altitudes."

"Aeon Corona VII exists in a different phase of existence than our fleet in orbit, practically speaking." Chief Avanaeon explained. "The turbulent astral winds are not quite constant, which means that not only is our means of observation above here limited to identifying large cities and major landmarks, we also can't provide much orbital support or provide reinforcements quickly."

"What does that mean for us on the ground?" The projection of a mech captain asked.

The chief engineer loaded in a data chip which contained a presentation of a model of the hugely complex astral winds surrounding a wireframe model of Aeon Corona VII. The suspected crash site of the Starlight Megalodon played host to a huge volcano-like pattern. Most of the winds flew out into space, but

a significant portion curled back and spread across the rest of the planet, suffusing its entire atmosphere with its distortive properties.

"The implications are numerous. First, it means that we won't be able to launch artificial meteorites with any degree of accuracy. It's like playing golf during a hurricane. The golf ball you're launching can end up anywhere and it's virtually impossible to calculate an accurate trajectory. By the time you've finished your calculations, the winds have already changed, rendering those calculations useless."

The chief engineer gazed at the unsettled expressions of the mech pilots expected to be deployed on the ground. "Second, it is extremely difficult to land our shuttles and transports on the ground, and even harder to get them to lift off. We have prepared modified shuttles and transports that can tentatively load troops, mechs, machinery and supplies from orbit to land, but it will be slow-going because we only have a few of them. In addition, it isn't safe to land our transports close to the epicenter of the anomaly. We have to land on the far side of the planet, close to some of the regions settled by the descendants of the original crew."

That caused an explosion of conversation to occur. The planet was massive! Trying to traverse thousands of kilometers on a planet with six times the gravity of Old Earth would strain their logistics!

"That might take months!" Another mech officer exclaimed. "The war will long be over by the time we complete the trek!"

"Do not forget the time distortion that is taking place on the surface of the planet." A science officer remarked. "With time running faster by at least ten times the galactic standard, your experience of the passage of time won't change, but to those outside of this star system we are running at superspeed."

This caused a lot of the mech officers to feel discomfited. Just getting their minds wrapped around the effects of the anomaly already made their heads hurt. They weren't cut out for this science stuff.

Major Verle decided to refocus the briefing. "Make no mistake, Vandals. We are in it for the long haul. This will be a lengthy campaign of which most of your time will be spent on long days of travel. Those on the ground will largely have to fend for ourselves. While those of us who remain in orbit will attempt to provide you with as much support as possible, you've already heard how difficult it is to drop additional supplies on you, especially once you are getting close to the Starlight Megalodon."

Chief Avanaeon proceeded to summarize the many limitations they faced in transporting goods and mechs from orbit to land and vice versa.

Combat carriers obviously couldn't land on a Super Earth. They would fall with so much force that most of them may not be able to arrest their fall in time. Launching themselves back to orbit even with completely empty hangar bays and cargo holds required several times more power which they plainly didn't have.

As for the shuttles and transports, the limited number that had been modified could not handle the increasingly turbulent astral winds blowing near the epicenter of the anomaly. They could only land at the far side of the planet.

As for takeoff, most of the transports could only do so with a half or a third of their usual capacity. Trying to launch into orbit from a planet with six times the gravity required at least six times the force, and loading their cargo holds to the brim simply weighed them down too much.

"This means that evacuating our assets on the ground will be excruciatingly slow." Chief Avanaeon concluded. "If we ever need to extract our forces on the ground with haste, we will need to be prepared to discard all of our mechs

and supplies and load up our transports with as many of our men and women as possible."

It would mean abandoning pricey landbound mechs collectively worth billions of credits along with other valuables. Still, as much as the Vandals valued their assets, they valued their lives more.

As long as they completed the mission, abandoning all of their landbound assets in a hurry could easily be justified.

"You know your limitations now." Major Verle took over again. "No matter how many complications we have met, the mission remains the same. Head to the Starlight Megalodon as fast as possible and loot the things we want before getting out as fast as possible. Since it is unsafe to land and lift off our transports in the same hemisphere as the anomaly, you will just have to march in and out on land. The only question is whether it is even possible and safe for you to approach the Starlight Megalodon on land."

"The astral winds and the distortion they cause grow incredibly strong in the vicinity of the source of the anomaly." The science officer cautioned. "To be frank, it is likely that a mech or person will be shredded or folded across space and time if they come within visual range of the battleship. We are working on a potential solution as fast as possible, but to be frank our research capabilities are limited."

"So what?" Captain Orfan asked. "If we want to loot the battleship, we have to sacrifice our lives and mechs?"

"Nothing so drastic." Major Verle quickly replied. "We are newcomers here. We have barely been in orbit for a day, and we know nothing about how to cope with the distortion. The descendants on the other hand have lived through several thousands of years. Even if they appear as if they have regressed in many ways, they have lived so long under these conditions that

they may have developed some ingenious tricks to mitigate the negative effects of the astral winds."

"What? We have to make nice with the savages, sir?"

Their commanding officer nodded. "If possible. The natives are the successors of the Common Fleet Alliance. Please do not regard them as savages. Treat them with the utmost respect, because sooner or later, the CFA will catch wind of this and come to rescue these trapped descendants. If they hear that we treated them like dirt or killed them unjustly, the entire Bright Republic will suffer!"

That caused every Vandal including Captain Orfan to lose their contempt for the inhabitants of Aeon Corona VII. No matter how far they strayed from the CFA, they still carried the blood of genuine spacers.

"Who's in charge on the ground?" Captain Orfan asked.

Her eager eyes betrayed her expectation. As one of their best landbound mech pilots, she earned the respect of every Vandal.

To the relief of Ves and some of the other mech officers, Major Verle instead turned towards another mech captain who had always been rather quiet and unremarkable.

"Captain Casey Byrd will be the ranking officer of our groundside forces. Captain Byrd is a steady leader who has taken classes in diplomacy and managing relations in the past. Her abilities will be essential in maintaining friendly ties to both the Swordmaidens and descendants."

The projection of Captain Orfan immediately stood up. "Sir, that's the wrong choice! Captain Byrd is a slowpoke, a cautious turtle! If she's in charge, we'll practically be crawling towards the Starlight Megalodon! Aren't we competing against pirates and the Vesians to reach the battleship first? Speed is of the essence here!"

Major Verle looked undeterred. "My choice is final, captain. Not only are Captain Byrd's talents more suited to these circumstances, she also enjoys seniority over you. Make no mistake. This is not a sprint. This is a marathon."

Captain Byrd smiled provocatively at Captain Orfan, causing the brash mech officer to hold out her anger. Steam practically flew from her ears!

Evidently, the two mech captains weren't the best of friends!

Chapter 774 Supply Constraints

Once the long and complicated briefing came to an end, the projections of the other Vandal officers winked out. Major Verle immediately left the conference room while the others also returned to their stations.

They had a lot of work ahead of themselves! As soon as the planners selected a landing site, they would need to spend several days just to transport all of their landbound assets to the ground. This slow and delicate operation required a lot of planning in order to proceed smoothly.

Ves slowed down a bit to catch up to the suited form of Chief Haine.

"Chief! Can I ask you something?"

"Sure, Ves."

"What can you tell me about Captain Byrd? I don't think I've met her on Detemen IV or any of the other groundside operations, though I've seen her during the briefings."

Most of the battles and incidents the Flagrant Vandals went through lately all happened in space. This left landbound mech pilots like Captain Orfan impotent and relegated to a spectator role.

The chief smirked at Ves. "Captain Byrd is an old salt among us Vandals. She may not be in her prime anymore, but she's still a good and dependance knight mech pilot. She's one of our steadier and older mech captains. If

Colonel Lowenfield or Major Verle want to accomplish something hard and fast, they go for Captain Orfan. If they want to accomplish something carefully and with absolute certainty, they go for Captain Byrd. The reason why you never heard of her is because she's usually assigned to hold the rear guard or perform some of the more boring assignments."

Ves understood the difference between the two captains now. "I would have thought that Major Verle or the mission planners have already decided the ranking officer beforehand. Or just go with seniority in the first place."

"We don't do that with the Vandals." The chief shook her head. "The mech officers we promote come from a mixed bunch. If we let the ones who promoted the earliest to take charge all the time, our mech regiment might not exist today. The brass always picks the officer who is most suited to the mission to take the lead. Before we arrived at Aeon Corona VII, we didn't know if we could get to the Starlight Megalodon instantly or not. If the distortion wasn't so bad, I bet that Major Verle would have picked Captain Orfan or one of the other aggressive officers to be in charge."

That made sense. Still, Ves recognized the contention in some of the Vandals when Major Verle announced the leader for the forces on the ground. Not everyone liked Captain Byrd for some reason.

"It would have been nice if Major Verle could come with us and take charge down on the surface." He sighed. "Too bad he's needed with the fleet."

"Without a good commander to keep our ships intact, there's no way we can exit this star system. In addition, our spaceborn forces will have to establish mines on one of the moons in order to supplement our supplies. All of that needs protecting."

A defeat in space could instantly negate any successes on the ground. Ves learned that lesson during the Groening mission. As long as Major Verle

remained in charge of their spaceborn assets, the Vandals on the ground didn't have to worry too much about their escape route being cut off all of a sudden.

Keeping the Flagrant Swordmaiden fleet intact was a big job. Not only did they have to secure their starships and mine the moons for resources, they also had to fend off potential attacks from the pirates, Vesians, sandmen any whatever else the star system threw at them during these months.

Furthermore, they also needed to safeguard the key that allowed them to configure their FTL drives to avoid the gravitic storms on their way out. If they ever lost the key, they'd be trapped inside the Aeon Corona System!

Therefore, both in space and on the ground, the Flagrant Vandals and Lydia's Swordmaidens needed to put their best leaders in charge.

While Major Verle would remain in space to lead the fleet, Commander Lydia would be joining the bulk of her Swordmaidens on the ground. Her rich frontier experience and proven leadership ability ensured that she would have most to say on the ground.

Due to the considerable amount of challenges their landbound mechs likely faced on the Super Earth, both Ves and Mayra were obliged to accompany the mechs sent down from orbit.

Though Ves did not like to admit it, the older Mayra would likely do a better job than him in keeping the mechs up and running under challenging circumstances. Deferring to her suggestions on major decisions may not be a bad idea. After all, this was exactly why the Swordmaidens became involved in the first place.

As they reached the juncture in the passageways where they split up, Ves asked one more question. "Do you have any advice for me when I'm deployed to the ground?"

"Yeah, plenty. This will be a lengthy campaign, so differences between the Vandals will flare up. The rivalry between our mech captains can be really fierce. Don't get caught up in their turf wars and pissing matches. Some of the more savvy mech officers will try to get in your good books. As head designer, you're above these stupid fights. Captain Byrd is in charge on the ground. If you have to listen to anyone, defer to her. Other than that, keep your head down and focus on doing your job."

"Thanks for the advice." Ves said appreciatively. If Chief Haine hadn't reminded him of this, he might have fallen into someone's camp without knowing it. "Hope to see you again in a few months. Until then!"

"Take care!"

When Ves returned to his office, he called his student forward. "Ketis. I'm not sure where you should go, to be honest. Mayra and I will be deployed to the surface, but you haven't received any assignments. You won't be able to stay on the Shield of Hispania unaccompanied, so you need to make a decision. Do you want to return to the Jaded Sword and remain in space, or do you want to follow us on the ground?"

"Of course I want to follow you down there!" She enthusiastically replied. "I heard there's lots of dangerous creatures down there, and I also get to meet the folks who managed to survive for thousands of years. Why shouldn't I go with you all?"

"It'll be dangerous. Besides the risks of approaching the spacetime distortion, the planet itself may throw lots of hazards at us. The fact that the descendants have only managed to settle a handful of large cities after millenia of development already shows how hard it is to survive on the Super Earth."

Ketis grinned even wider. The threats that Ves listed out only stoked her eagerness to join the ground forces. "That sounds like music to my ears! Do

you think a Swordmaiden like me wants to turn away from such an adventure? Count me in! Besides, Mayra is going down there as well."

"Alright, I'll add you to the list. Just don't regret your choice."

The Flagrant Vandals and the Swordmaidens engaged in a flurry of work to prepare their landing operation. Sending transports loaded with mechs and heavy equipment onto a Super Earth wracked with astral winds forced them to adjust their original deployment plan. For one, they needed to make a lot more trips and carry less with each trip.

It may take days before the allied force finished conveying all of their landbound assets on the ground.

He spent the next hours adjusting the schedule so that all of the most battle ready mechs went down first. Wherever the Flagrant Swordmaidens decided to land, they might end up in the midst of hostile territory. From some of the rumors that started circulating, the exobiologists threw out the possibility that some monstrously strong and powerful creatures had emerged.

There was a chance that continued proximity and exposure to the higher-dimensional particles that made up of the astral wind had affected both the wildlife and the stranded humans in unpredictable ways!

No one could tell whether the astral winds prompted an adaptation or a mutation to the organisms. Aside from that, the Super Earth also contained exotics concentrated in various deposits scattered here and there. Just like Groening IV, the presence of deposits may have guided the evolution of the indigenous life forms in an unpredictable and dangerous direction.

That was how life on exotic planets usually turned out.

After more than half a day of extra preparation and delay, the Flagrant Swordmaidens finally moved on to the next phase! The fleet went to lower

orbit and specialized transports and shuttles modified with stronger propulsion and antigrav fields started to load up the initial mechs.

The first ones to go received the job of securing their landing site.

After a lot of discussion, the Vandals and the Swordmaidens decided to land in a barren, hilly terrain. Vandal geological scanners already detected a significant deposit of junk exotics in the hills which they could mine and use to produce more supplies or barter for goods and services with the descendants.

One thing was for sure. The supplies the Flagrant Swordmaidens prepared for this mission likely wouldn't last them for the entire duration! As the earlier briefing already made it clear that the forces on the ground couldn't expect much replenishment from orbit, the ground forces needed to be self-sufficient!

"That's going to be too difficult!" Ves observed as he studied the final plans.

"We're sending down way too much heavy equipment. Just dragging all of that stuff with us as we march towards the Starlight Megalodon will be a huge burden."

On a planet with a gravity that multiplied everything's weight by six, the consequences to everyone deployed to the ground was drastic.

A serviceman wearing a hazard suit weighed something like a hundred kilograms in standard gravity. Once that person landed on the surface of Aeon Corona VII, they suddenly weighed more than half a metric ton!

Without any servos or mechanical assistance, an average human wouldn't be able to move under those circumstances!

This only applied to their personnel, but it was far worse for their mechs and transport vehicles. Mechs would move as if they carried five extra copies of its model on its shoulders, while the Vandals were forced to deploy legged versions of transports in order to carry around their supplies!

The large number of antigrav modules incorporated in all of the mechs, vehicles and other equipment helped mitigate the crushing gravity. However, working non-stop to counteract at least five g's at all times drained a lot of energy.

The number one priority of the Vandals and the Swordmaidens on the ground was to protect their portable power reactors and to figure out a way to increase their power generation! Without enough energy to feed their antigrav modules, their mechs would slow to a crawl and their personnel would be forced to lie flat on the ground in order to avoid blacking out!

Solving such problems became the responsibility of the logistics officers and the various technical staff accompanying the mech pilots deployed to the surface.

In fact, Ves predicted that people like him would play a leading role. The challenges the Flagrant Swordmaidens faced on the ground were predominantly technical in nature.

"The first transports have reached the surface. Our vanguard has secured the landing zone. Prepare the second wave for departure!"

Ves currently wore his Earth Ant and all of the gear he could carry on his armor. Ketis sat next to him brimming with excitement. They both sat among the Vandals assigned to join their comrades on the surface in the third wave.

An entire hour passed before the second wave finished making landfall.

"Send in the third wave! Go!"

The shuttle flew out of the shuttle bay of the Shield of Hispania and oriented towards the storm-wracked globe that dominated their view. With a careful spurt, the shuttle began to descend at an angle. Already, the errant distortions caused the shuttle to rattle.

"Woohoo! Here we go!" Someone shouted.

"Get ready boys and girls, because this is going to be a wild ride!"

Chapter 775 Heavy Landfall

The projection that showed the front view of the shuttle conveyed a marvelous image of Aeon Corona VII. The strong astral winds caused the massive planet to resemble a sun in its own right. Beneath the turbulent streams of higher-dimensional particles, a beautiful and largely untamed planet beckoned them all to step foot on its surface.

As the shuttle descended gradually into the planet's formidable gravity well, it started to fight against the forces that wanted to plummet it straight towards the ground.

The shuttle began to make contact with the Super Earth's atmosphere. As the vehicle continued its descent, it began to compress the air in its path. This caused the immediate surroundings to heat up until flames finally emerged around the shuttle.

The shuttle's descent caused so much compression of air over such rapid speeds that plasma started to burn around its hull as it continued its way downwards!

While the vehicle was well-protected against the heat, none of the shuttle's occupants felt comfortable about it. The increasingly stronger rattling as well as the strengthening spacetime distortion caused a lot of weaker Vandals to feel nauseous.

While someone as fit and strong as Ketis held up fine, some of the logistics officers such as Lieutenant Commander Soapstone started to barf inside their hazard suits or suits of combat armor.

Fortunately, every modern suit these days came with a ready response to a vomiting wearer. A thin sack emerged out of a slot from the inside of her collar and neatly captured the vomit spewing out of Soapstone's mouth.

Once she emptied her stomach, the sack of vomit automatically detached from her suit, only to be picked up by a shakily hovering cleaning bot hidden inside the shuttle.

Over a third of the Vandals aboard the shuttle ended up emptying the contents of their stomachs.

Ves felt uneasy as well, but his strengthened body firmly managed to keep the lid on his stomach. Ketis glanced at Ves with some respect for not being a part of the losers who couldn't handle a slightly rough atmospheric entry.

"Did you land on a wild planet before?" She yelled. The rush of the descent along with the overstrained propulsion fighting against the planet's gravity threw up a lot of noise, making it hard to hear what she said. "You look like this isn't your first time!"

"I've been on some adventures!" He yelled back. "Though I've never set foot on a Super Earth before!"

"Me neither!" She grinned at him. "It's usually more trouble than it's worth to land on a heavy gravity planet, but I'm glad we have the chance this time! Who knows we'll experience down there! I can't wait!"

Though Ves did not share her enthusiasm, a small part of his body thrummed in anticipation. To say he dreaded this deployment was an understatement. He was frightened out of his mind.

Yet the more he feared his next destination, the more he anticipated it as well!

A large, rich and livable planet like Aeon Corona VII potentially hid a lot of rare and unique treasures. From the remnants of advanced technology they could

barter from the regressed descendants, to the deposits of rare exotics that the exogeologists believe was present, Ves and the Vandals potentially stood to gain an unimaginable amount of riches.

Of course, the Vandals didn't go through the trouble of entering the deep frontier for such meager gains. Recovering the treasures of the Starlight Megalodon remained their overarching priority. Nothing else mattered if they failed to reach the Starlight Megalodon and made it off with the bounty locked inside her bosom!

The rattling eventually subsided after a lengthy fall. The shuttle stabilized a bit, though the noises emanated by its antigrav modules and its sublight propulsion grew even stronger.

The closer the shuttle approached the surface, the harder it had to fight against its heavy gravity!

In addition, its propulsion also fought hard to arrest the shuttle's downward momentum. It wouldn't do to reach the surface quickly only to end up in a crash!

The rumbling actually started to grow stronger as the shuttle fought as hard as possible to shed its terminal velocity.

Once the shuttle reached the final kilometer of altitude, the vehicle still descended like a rock, but at least this time it wouldn't splatter its parts all over the landing zone.

With deft control, the shuttle pilot guided the hot but intact shuttle to the designated landing pad nestled in between some barren hills.

The Vandals chose to make landfall in this region because of the apparent scarcity of flora and fauna. If any exobeasts decided to attack the strangers from the stars, at least the Vandals and the Swordmaidens would see the attackers coming from their defensible position.

After the long and arduous descent, the crispy shuttle finally touched down on the makeshift landing pad made out of prefab material. Once the exterior of the shuttle cooled down a bit, the hatch opened up, allowing the discomfited and nauseous Vandals to exit first.

Not that the fresh air was any better. Though technically the terraforming of the first human visitors made it safe to breathe by baseline humans, the unfamiliar mix of gasses as well as the tangy smell caused Lieutenant Commander Soapstone to dry heave.

Ves and Ketis exited the shuttle a minute later. Ves breathed deep and frowned a bit. Though his modified lungs could breathe through certain types of toxic air, that didn't mean he liked the smell and taste of alien air.

The atmosphere of Aeon Corona VII had already been extensively tested by the scientists sent as part of the first and second waves. They detected neither toxins or germs dangerous to baseline humans in the air, so the prevailing policy was to conserve their oxygen reserves as much as possible unless new proof emerged that said otherwise.

The temperature was also remarkably temperate, though the Vandals deliberately chose to land at one of the most comfortable areas in the northern hemisphere terms of climate.

"What is this tangy smell in the air?" Ves puzzled over it. "It smells familiar, but not quite."

"Smells like metal." Ketis remarked. "Didn't you say this landing zone is next to a large deposit of ores and junk exotics?"

"Ah."

The current plan called for establishing a foothold and to construct a temporary base at their landing site. Hopefully, the deposits provided them with enough resources to mass-produce extra legged transports to expand the

size of their supply train and pump out scores of cheap turrets to guard their base against raiding pirates or Vesians.

Though the Flagrant Swordmaidens hadn't detected the presence of their rivals, they knew for certain that they would be around somewhere. The planet and its orbit was too big right now for them to bump into each other right now, but that would certainly change once they got closer to the Starlight Megalodon.

As for the sandmen, there was a large probability that they might be present on this planet as well, though for some reason the Vandals hadn't spotted any sandmen colonies from orbit.

Aeon Corona VII wasn't actually an ideal planet to the silicate life forms. While the huge planet's abundant resource deposits might have interested the sandmen, the heavy gravity was simply hell to the race.

They wouldn't be able to move so fast and fluid without expending at least six times more energy. For a race that largely resembled bots, the logical choice would be to avoid settling on heavy gravity planets. The energy expenditure in settling them and maintaining a colony on them simply wasn't worth it unless the value of its bounty surpassed the extra effort.

While the exobiologists and the other analysts in the employ of the Vandals didn't claim to be able to read the sandmen's minds, they didn't rule out their presence on the surface of the planet.

A battleship or the origin of the ongoing anomaly should be more than enough to attract their interest!

Once the Vandals who came off the shuttle acclimatized a bit, a guide garbed in a hazard suit approach the newcomers. "Alright, folks, welcome to Aeon Corona VII, or as we like to call it, Seven! By now, we've transmitted your next orders along with a map of our expanding base into your comms. Don't be

surprised if the map changes every hour. This place will look twice as big twenty-four hours later. By the way, one day on Seven lasts for forty-three hours, so don't judge the time by the three glowing dots in the sky!"

One of the Vandals raised their hand. "Did you catch any critters yet that we can eat?"

All of the Vandals laughed at that. Their guide grinned as well. "If we do, then we'll be sure to cook it up and have you take the first bite. Don't blame us if you drop dead the next second!"

The joke livened up the mood and made them forget about the discomforts of their new environment.

Their guide pointed an armored thumb behind his shoulder. "One more warning. Do you see all of the paved and plated ground we've laid out? All of those areas are safe to traverse. Active antigrav modules make sure that all of the paved areas fall within their antigrav field, which means that if your mass is seventy kilograms, your weight is seventy kilograms as well, give or take a few k's. If you stray too far outside the paved ground though, don't be surprised if you suddenly weigh as much as your fat mother!"

That caused another burst of laughter to escape from everyone's mouths. Still, every Vandal present took the warning to heart. Nobody wanted to become imprisoned in their own bodies when they landed outside one of the active antigrav fields.

"What are you standing around here for? Get a move on!"

Ves consulted the map and found that the base had actually been split up into two. One half hosted the Vandals while the other half hosted the Swordmaidens.

Though he wanted to pay a visit to see how the Swordmaidens set themselves up, he knew that his current duties compelled him to remain with

the Vandals first. He turned to Ketis and gestured in the vague direction of the Swordmaiden side of the base.

"Right now, I have to take care of a lot of paperwork and other boring stuff. If you want, feel free to return to the Swordmaidens. I'm sure Mayra will be glad to see you again. You can even show off your new accomplishments."

"Good idea!" She nodded her head like a chipmunk. "I've already told her about finding my design philosophy, but I haven't showed it off to her yet! I bet she'll be really proud of me when I tell her how amazing I am right now!"

Ketis quickly scampered off to the Swordmaiden side of the base, though at least she made sure to stay firmly on the paved paths. Ves shook his head and followed the directions to the only mech workshop set up so far, though it wouldn't be the only one up for long.

"We've finally reached this planet, huh." Ves idly remarked.

He almost couldn't believe their long journey had reached this point. He somewhat missed the idle days of travel in space interspersed with occasional battle, but he figured their situation on the ground wouldn't be much different.

As Ves glanced at the construction machines setting up prefab structures to the sides, he wondered how the descendants managed to survive on this planet for so long.

Obviously, they managed to employ a form of antigrav technology that shielded their cities from the crushing gravity.

Yet did they master this tech from the start, or was it starting to become a lost art? This was one of the possible reasons the analysts put forward as an explanation as to why the descendants hadn't expanded their presence on the planet after thousands of years.

If they truly mastered the planet, their population should have ballooned into the billions by now. However, current estimates on their population put them at no more than a few million humans.

What limited their growth?

Chapter 776 A Heavy Burden

Ves supervised the intake of mechs sent down to the surface of Aeon Corona VII from a prefab bunker that functioned as a temporary headquarters for Captain Byrd and all of the staff.

Due to screw ups in the loading order and the irregular streams of astral winds that made it unsafe to fly to at some times, plenty of mixups happened that needed to be untangled.

The wrong mechs got sent down first. The transports brought down spare parts for spaceborn mechs instead of landbound mechs. They brought down too much shuttle-grade fuel and too little mech-grade fuel. A handful of landbound mechs collided against each other and incurred some awful dents when a transport almost lost control during the descent.

Because the Flagrant Vandals sent down almost two-hundred-and-fifty mechs and enough supplies and equipment to make them mostly self-sufficient, logistical matters became the number one concern for the allied forces.

While Captain Byrd assigned mechs on patrols and scouting missions and prepared her entire available force of mechs against any possible attacks, nothing threatening showed up so far. Only bacteria and perhaps some errant bushes lived in these arid parts.

The barren, ore-rich region they landed in never hosted any life from what they could gather. This sounded perfect for the Flagrant Swordmaidens as they sorted out their various problems in peace.

Both the Swordmaidens and the Vandals also needed to become acclimatized to the foreign environment. Anytime someone looked up their heads, the sky became dominated by the constant flows of astral winds. It reminded Ves of Cloudy Curtain, but only much more cheerful.

One peculiarity about the astral winds was that they did not obscure any stellar objects. The small dots that signified one of the five moons or the three suns radiated through the higher-dimensional particles as if they resonated with each other in some way.

Not even the astrophysicists had come up with an explanation for that phenomenon. They were all hard at work trying to make sense of the astral winds themselves and how a battleship with a malfunctioning FTL drive could even release so much of the stuff.

From an engineering standpoint, Ves had some questions as well. For example, how could that leaky FTL drive remain operative after three-thousand years of continuous operation?!

Any machine this complex would have broken down after a couple of months of continuous operation due to sheer wear and tear. In the longer term, corrosion and other possible influences became greater concerns.

"Is there someone or something maintaining the operation of the malfunctioning FTL drive?" Ves wondered.

No matter what the deal was with the Starlight Megalodon, the truth would be revealed once they reached it. They just needed to get there, and that was a massive operation in itself.

The Flagrant Swordmaidens needed to cross tens of thousands of kilometers through hostile terrain and unknown threats. In the meantime, they continually had to fight against Seven itself, its crushing gravity continuing to loom over them and only staved off by their technological countermeasures.

Besides logistics, Ves worried deeply about the performance of the landbound mechs outside the base's antigrav field envelope.

The Vandals tested each of their landbound mechs. Each of them underwent a raft of modifications to prepare them for their deployment on a planet like Seven. Through the preceding months, Ves had inspected each landbound mech's individual design and put his stamp on them, assured that they'd be able to hold up against six times normal gravity.

Yet calculations and simulations only went so far. The true test came when the actual mechs subjected them to the planet's gravity in all its glory.

Fortunately, the mechs held up. Mostly.

As Ves switched his console to a feed that depicted various mechs stepping inside and outside the base, he noticed that most of them did so under the influence of their heavy-duty gravitic backpack modules.

The backpacks the Vandals and the Swordmaidens procured on Harkensen III did their jobs as advertised. They lighted up the influence of gravity just enough to make them able to move and fight as if they moved on a planet close to standard gravity.

Of course, all of this performance came at the cost of expending huge amounts of energy. The backpacks barely lasted an hour of normal operation. The energy expenditure of running close to five-hundred landbound mechs by both the Vandals and the Swordmaidens would drain them dry of energy after a month!

In the meantime, continuous long-term operation wore out some of its components quickly, so it was essential for the Flagrant Swordmaidens to set up a dedicated department that serviced the backpacks as they slowly degraded in performance.

"Still, that's not as interesting as seeing mechs attempting to move with the backpacks turned off."

He switched to another feed where the Vandals conducted a test with an average spearman mech. The machine in question fell within the middle of the medium weight class, and therefore served as a good guide to how the other mechs might fare under the same circumstances.

The test area in which the mech stood suddenly lost its antigrav field, subjecting the spearman mech to the full might of Seven's gravity. The mech's weight suddenly multiplied by six, causing the machine that was as tall as a small office building to falter and strain as its mech pilot frantically tried to adjust.

The antigrav fields came back online after a few minutes had passed.

The test ended early because the mech pilot risked blacking out!

Ves dove into the logs and the preliminary results of the test. It turned out that while the mech barely possessed the power to move, it largely held up against the strain. Most of the modifications that Ves had pushed through safeguarded its delicate components against the persistent effects of heavy gravity.

The weak point turned out to be the mech pilot. The heavy gravity curtailed the mech pilot's heart from pumping a sufficient amount of blood to the head, thereby starving it of the oxygen it desperately needed to operate the mech!

As the act of piloting a mech essentially centered around interfacing the mind of the mech pilot with the mech in question, a starved mind wouldn't have the energy to effectively control a mech!

"Damn." Ves cursed. "These upright piloting seats may be ergonomically optimal, but they're fatal when it comes to heavy gravity environments."

While the cockpit and the piloting suit incorporated smaller antigrav modules that lightened the gravity the mech pilot was subjected to, they hadn't been activated during this test. It appeared that a mech which turned off its gravitic backpack really couldn't do without any gravity compensation for the pilot!

"I can't believe I overlooked this fault." He grumbled. He should have implemented a modification that allowed the mech pilot to recline on his back while piloting.

While this would be an easy change to implement for some mechs that make use of less rigid neural interfaces, others required a lot more effort in order to implement such a change.

It would be especially challenging to push through such a change for light mechs as their cockpits sometimes didn't have enough space to accommodate a fully reclining mech pilot.

"I'll have to discuss this idea first with the other mech designers and chiefs." He decided. "Maybe I can discuss this further with Mayra as well."

They definitely needed to do something. Ves wouldn't contemplate such a change if the Flagrant Swordmaidens only intended to stay for a week or so. That wasn't the case though, as a trek involving tens of thousands of kilometers took them at least half a month to a year according to most estimates.

"There's going to be times when running an antigrav field may not be possible or advisable."

Antigrav fields didn't mix well with strong spacetime distortions. In addition, they functioned like beacons in the night on gravitic sensors. While the astral winds limited their long-ranged detection range, they would have no trouble finding mechs over the horizon if they ran a sufficiently strong antigrav field!

Therefore, trying to find ways to cope with the heavy gravity became everyone's overarching concern. There were too many chances of equipment failure and they plainly lacked the energy budget to keep all of the backpacks running.

"Even deploying less mechs won't help that much, because how are we going to move them in the first place?"

Right now, the Vandals and the Swordmaidens focused much of their limited industrial capacity on expanding the base and constructing cheap legged transports.

These huge machines that resembled six-legged hexapods could carry a mech or two or a handful of containers on their backs.

While they boasted a lot of carrying capacity and the ability to move without under the influence of an antigrav field, they came with their own downsides. For one, they progressed forward at a snail's pace, and expended enormous amounts of energy or fuel by doing so.

Fortunately, these legged transports didn't require any high-quality fuel to run. The Vandals brought down plenty of cheaply synthesized fuel to run these crawlers as the Vandals called them in an efficient manner.

Still, their fuel ran out eventually, so the Vandals needed to secure another source of fuel eventually. Everyone involved with logistics wracked their heads over the deficiencies in their energy budget. In the headquarters, Ves heard Lieutenant Commander Soapstone talking to everyone about this issue.

For now, nobody came up with a viable solution except to abandon the transports one by one as their supplies slowly dwindled over time.

"This journey isn't going to be easy." Ves shook his head.

After a long stretch of work, Ves ended his shift by scheduling a meeting for the next standard day. He wanted to meet every mech designer and chief technicians sent to the surface and discuss the various issues that have cropped up during this time.

Ves knew that if they wanted to last the entire journey to the Starlight Megalodon, he needed to keep a tight lid on the mech designers while making sure the chief technicians were all on the same page.

The chief technicians might not necessarily fall in line with Ves. They were part of a separate hierarchy and technically Ves was merely an advisor to them. He did not intend to let the chiefs do whatever they wanted, especially since some of them had recently been elevated to their ranks after the Acolytes of Haatumak assassinated their predecessors.

Ves was determined not to tolerate any screw ups under his domain. Advisor or not, Ves wanted the chiefs to be firmly under his thumb by the end of the week. Nobody except him was more capable to lead the complex maintenance department of the Vandal groundside forces.

The actual chain of command be damned, this was his kingdom!

Ves was absolutely certain that nobody else among the Vandals understood mechs more than him. Without Major Verle looking over his shoulders, he felt less constrained in his actions. Taking on a bit more authority than he officially had been granted with may not be very kosher, but he doubted anyone among the Vandals cared.

"I'll have to sound out Captain Byrd and see what I can get away with under her." He cautioned himself. "From all accounts, she's a conservative leader. I shouldn't rock the boat too much at first."

Ves already heard some grumbling from the servicemen about her elevation to the commander of the Vandal groundside forces. With the astral winds

preventing any direct communication between the landed troops and the fleet orbiting far above the glowing sky, Captain Byrd wielded sole authority over every aspect of their unit.

The Vandal ground force lived and died by her decisions.

That concerned Ves a bit, because unlike someone such as Captain Orfan, he had never come into contact with Captain Byrd nor experienced how she exercised her commands. Was she a careful, meticulous thinker and diplomat as the rumors had said, or was there something more to this quiet mech captain that somehow gained Major Verle's appreciation?

"I should have a meeting with her as well."

Chapter 777 Heavy Pressure

Properly speaking, Aeon Corona VII did not have nights in the traditional sense. Its forty-three hour days subjected one hemisphere to the light of the trinary stars while denying it to the other side of the planet.

Yet what role could sunlight play on a planet lit by the glow of higher-dimensional particles? It not only cast the entire planet in a decidedly golden tint, there wasn't any real night to speak of. The only change in the sky when 'night' finally fell was that the trio of suns dipped below the horizon.

Strangely enough, the lack of true night unsettled the Vandals far more than the heavy gravity. They already had months to prepare for deployment on a heavy gravity planet, so they hardly became fazed when they finally stepped foot on Seven.

The astral winds that raged above the skies came extra, though. The distortion running through their bodies and constant brightness shining down from above made it feel as if they had intruded into some hallowed godly domain where mortals like them simply didn't belong.

How could anyone live on this planet? Its properties differed too far from the human norm that the excitement the Vandals gained from embarking on their mission firmly faded from their minds.

All they felt now was a faint dread for all the surprises this strange and alien planet had in store for them. Terraformed or not, many Vandals could hardly stomach the thought of enduring months under these bright and blinding skies.

Ves coped a little better. The bright astral winds may look a bit unsettling to the average person, but as someone who grew up on Cloudy Curtain, he never needed any clear skies to lift up his mood.

As the standard clock the Vandals and Swordmaidens have adopted turned to evening, Ves decided to take a break after he addressed all of the acute problems. As he stepped outside the temporary headquarters, he saw that the base looked a lot livelier now.

The Vandals set up a lot of prefab structures that could be deployed and folded back into a compact container on a jiffy. This would be important because the ground forces intended to bring them along and set them up each time they needed to halt.

Therefore, the prefab structures didn't look particularly impressive. Consisting of thin, bare metal plates, what they gained in modularity and ease of handling, they gave up in sturdiness and reliability.

Compared to mech armor, the structures were only as tough as the armor of a cheap light mech. While this would be sufficient to keep the structures somewhat stable, it didn't turn them into any defensive fortifications. They could withstand infantry-grade firepower easily enough, but when it came to mech-grade weapons, even a single round would be able to blast a huge hole in the walls.

This didn't matter too much as the bases were only intended as mobile stopover points to service mechs and process any resources that they might gather.

The landbound mechs at their disposal formed their true defense. With their mechs on patrol, nothing should be able to sneak up close to the base to have a clear shot at them, if any enemies on the planet even used any ranged weapons.

Due to the heavy gravity that had a tendency to drag any projectiles down the ground before they reached far enough to hit their target, neither the Vandals nor the Swordmaidens brought any ballistic rifles. Every ranged mech either already made use of a laser rifle or had been forced to adopt one over their primary weapons.

Melee mechs would still be able to move quickly with their gravitic backpacks active. Of course, melee combat in general needed a whole new revision as the Vandal and Swordmaiden mech pilots figured out they could hit a lot harder if they struck from above and deactivated their antigrav modules at the same time.

Any mech that tipped over or lost their balance while outside the influence of any antigrav fields pretty much had no chance to recover during a battle. Falling under six times gravity was the worst thing that could happen to any mech or person on foot.

As Ves headed over to the Swordmaiden side of the camp, he saw a few off-duty Vandals goofing off. They experimented with trying to see if they could remain functional as they deactivated a nearby antigrav module.

"C'mon, hurry up, Suze! Turn it off already"

"I've got it! Three, two, one, it's off!"

The Vandal standing in the middle of a clearing suddenly buckled and screamed a bit. The man remained upright solely due to the virtue of his light combat armor which locked up his legs and automatically adjusted his balance.

"Turn.. it.. on!"

Once the Vandal in control of the system switched the antigrav module back online, the man who tested his body sighed in relief. "That was far too sudden! I became so heavy that my bones started creaking! I can't imagine surviving outside this field."

Several more Vandals curiously tested out how their bodies would fare under heavy gravity. Having learned their lesson, this time Suzie dialed down the power of the antigrav module gradually until it stopped exerting anything against the prevailing gravity.

Without exception, many of the Vandals serving as technicians, machinists or some other support capacity simply couldn't handle the strain. None of them could cope with remaining upright, but they lasted a bit longer if they laid down flat on the ground.

Those in less rigid outfits such as hazard suits fared the worst. The lack of structure in them combined with the fact that only the weakest Vandals wore them meant they crumbled into a heap pretty quickly even as the gravity ramped up slowly.

Those with combat training, greater fitness and perhaps enjoyed some genetic tune-ups fared better. Even without relying on the servos of their combat armor, they possessed enough strength to remain upright, though moving forward was a significant challenge in itself. If their combat armor ever ran out of energy, its weight turned into a burden instead of a boon.

Just as Ves planned to walk past by the experimenting Vandals, he halted in his steps. "This is a good time as any to test out my own ability to cope with the gravity."

He turned around and approached the group. The Vandals looked up at him and some of them even recognized him. "Mr. Larkinson!"

The low-ranking Vandals attempted to stand at attention as if he was an officer.

"Relax, folks. Let me give it a try as well."

"Uh, you sure? The gravity is no joke, sir."

"Don't worry about me. I'm not as weak as my profession suggests."

After a bit of reassurance, Ves stepped in the middle of the testing zone. Once he gave the signal, Suzie carefully dialed down the effects of the antigrav module.

As the gravity steadily reassured itself around Ves, he felt the pressure adding up to his body.

It felt less like hauling a huge boulder over his shoulder and more like his own flesh and blood started to war against him. It was like taking a dive underneath the ocean, but instead of the pressure coming from all directions, it primarily pointed down to the ground.

Ves experimentally lifted his arm and found it took quite a bit of exertion from him to do so. He continued to make a couple of movements, each of them slow enough to suggest to the onlookers that he had been engaging his armor servos.

He didn't.

Nobody knew about his body enhancements he gained from a past expedition to the frontier except for Major Verle, Doctor Cuscar and perhaps a couple of other medical personnel.

He even hid his strength from Ketis, who probably thought of him as a frail nerd who didn't belong in the frontier.

It didn't matter anyway. Even if his Jutland organ transformed his genes and his body into the foundation of a warrior, he lacked the training to be able to beat someone like Ketis.

As a mech designer, Ves had no use for a large amount of physical strength. The incredible amount of endurance that came along as well was a lot more useful, though. It let him survive situations that would have killed a skinny mech designer ten times over.

Right now though, his physical enhancements played a greater role than before. Ves pleasantly found out that not only did he possess the strength to move normally without keeling over, his endurance also provided him with the staying power to cope with the increased exertion.

It was as if his body already possessed the essential qualities of a heavy gravity variant human.

"This can come in handy in the future." He noted before he turned to the onlookers. "Thanks, I've tested enough."

Ves also briefly tested the functionality of his Earth Ant, though his light combat armor exhibited no unexpected surprises. The customized armor held up marvelously, and according to the telemetry, his servos never suffered undue strain.

As he crossed over into the Swordmaiden side of the camp, he witnessed the differences immediately. Both the layout and the general conduct of the Swordmaidens differed drastically from the Vandals.

Prefab structures had been placed without any care for alignment, Swordmaidens ran all over the place and their thralls did much of the actual work in the background.

Oh yes, the Swordmaidens brought their slaves.

Ves frowned as he stared at the robotic men in distinctly lesser hazard suits as they performed all of the menial tasks the Swordmaidens disdained to do. He felt as if he had traveled right back to the Age of Stars where humanity often faced the threat of enslavement from vastly more powerful alien neighbors.

"If this is what Ketis is surrounded by every day, no wonder she doesn't think too well of mech technicians."

Well, Ves was no crusader, nor did he aspire to become a saint. The fate of the slaves had nothing to do with him so he resolutely ignored the men as they followed the orders of their Swordmaiden supervisors without any hint of resistance due to their brainwashing.

If Ves ignored the slaves, he found that the Swordmaidens possessed their own charm. Their mechs moved with grace under the antigrav fields, while the Swordmaidens on foot kept up their vigilance.

Ves attracted plenty of stares, and as he asked for directions to the mech workshop, Ketis showed up again.

"Ves!" She ran up to him in her heavy combat armor, causing the tiles beneath his feet to transmit the vibrations. "You're here! Mayra told me you just crossed over in our base, so she ordered me to fetch you and show you around. Come!"

As she dragged Ves to the mech workshops, she started babbling about the various sights.

"Look at this mech with the red stripe running down the center of the frame. You'll see this mech a lot with us. It's the Devil Razor, one of Mayra's most popular designs among my sisters. It's as plentiful as your Vandal Inheritor mechs but of better quality."

Ves did see a lot of Swordmaiden mechs with a red stripe on top of their regular coating. Different from the Vandals, the Swordmaidens personalized their mechs with adding patterns, exobeast bones and other decorative measures.

No two Devil Razor looked the same. Some used a lighter coating scheme, others loaded up some extra backup knives, while one oddball mech coated her mech in pink of all colors.

The only thing they had in common was that they all retained the thick stripe in the center.

"The Devil Razor does look impressive." He said sincerely. As someone more comfortable with designing landbound mechs, he possessed a keen eye in judging their quality. Ves mentally pegged the mech as a product that could be sold for 30 million credits, around the same as one of his old Marc Antony models.

This didn't sound impressive at first, but Mayra managed to design and fabricate large numbers of this mech through her own efforts!

Chapter 778 Silver Valencia

"The Devil Razors are the mainstay of our mech force." Ketis explained as she led Ves to the Swordmaiden mech workshops via the scenic route.

"Mayra designed them as dependable work horses that can be deployed on most planets without malfunctioning."

The medium swordsman mechs with their broad, flat swords and their iconic red stripe running down the center of their front lifted up the hearts of every Swordmaiden that spotted them. They made for an inspiring sight.

"What are the properties of its design?" He asked. While he formed his own impression from observing them in person, he was curious whether they tallied up with the truth. "I take it these are designed to be versatile?"

"Yup!" Ketis nodded. "Mayra told me that her biggest priorities for the Devil Razors is to design a mech that can last the Swordmaidens for a while. Therefore, she hasn't added too many bells and whistles to its design. It's a basic medium swordsman mech with a reliable and robust internal architecture. Only after she completed that did she thought about increasing its other capabilities."

"That is a good starting point, especially if Mayra is designing a mech that is supposed to be a mainstay for a pirate force."

"Ordinarily, the Devil Razors are rather light and quick on their feet. Mobility is one of their strong suits. That and they can add a lot of force to their strikes even with just a little momentum built up."

"They don't look very tough, though." Ves remarked. He knew that pirates generally didn't make use of mechs with compressed armor. It took a lot of expertise to work with the complicated armor formulas and fabricate compressed armor without any cracks or imperfections dragging down their defensive capabilities. "Since they're quicker and lighter on their feet than other swordsman mech, I take it they can't take much of a beating."

"That's true." Ketis admitted. "Adding better armor would slow down its other advantages, and we have knight mechs and other mechs that can focus on defense on their stead. Most of our Swordmaidens prefer to go on the attack rather than remain on the defense."

"Another advantage that is probably relevant here is that because they are lighter than average, their gravitic backpacks won't have to strain themselves as much. They'll certainly last longer than any of the heavier mechs."

"Yeah, I forgot to mention that. The Devil Razors aren't the most efficient mechs, but they don't guzzle them up as much as the heavier mechs."

"Still, as remarkable as the Devil Razor sounds, I doubt it serves as the signature mech of the Swordmaidens."

"We also have the Silver Valencia." She mentioned. "We don't have a lot of them, but some of our best mech pilots have earned the right to pilot them. It's a swordsman mech that has all of the advantages of the Devil Razor but also makes up for their weaknesses by incorporating compressed armor. While we can't fabricate them on our own, we had them made at Malligan's Pitstop."

"Are there any Silver Valencias nearby that I can observe?"

Ketis shook her head. "Not at the moment. Right now, we're working on tweaking them to make sure they can run smoothly on this planet. Since they're our most expensive mechs, we don't want them to fail in the middle of a battle. Mayra and I were working on the final tweaks just earlier. I'll show you how they look like!"

They reached the sloppy row of prefab workshops and brushed past the slaves who had been conditioned to stand aside at the approach of each Swordmaiden. Ves felt very uncomfortable passing by what should have been kin to him. These poor sods didn't look like they deserved to be brainwashed and turning into human-shaped bots for the Swordmaidens.

"Have you Swordmaidens ever tried to make do without the slaves?"

Ketis looked at him with an expression that told him he didn't know anything about the frontier. "Are you kidding me? I thought we had gone over this. There's way too many technicians or people trained to service mechs and

ships for us to rely on volunteers. I know the slaves bother you civilized people a lot, but don't try to pretend we have any other choice. I don't like them more than you do."

Her tone brokered no argument on this matter. To be fair, Ves knew a lost cause when he saw one. Trying to divest the Swordmaidens of their slaves when they really needed on this mission would be to cripple one of their limbs just as they were about to step into the arena.

He would only do more harm if he harped on this point, not that the Swordmaidens would listen to him in the first place.

Once they walked past the entrance, the entire interior darkened up as the bare metal prefab walls blocked out all of the radiance from the astral winds. His eyes adjusted quickly, though at some points he found the workshop to be too dark.

"Here they are. The Silver Valencias!"

The handful of mounts in this workshop currently lifted up four largely identical mechs. To say that they were upgraded Devil Razors was to do them a disservice. Due to their partially disassembled states, Ves caught a good glimpse of their insides.

Visually, their appearance and profile resembled the Devil Razors like how cousins resembled each other. He could definitely tell that both designs had been developed by the same mech designer, and all by herself to boot!

Their internal architecture looked a lot more sophisticated than that of what a simpler mech like the Devil Razor made use of. Premium materials along with a focused design towards combining power and flexibility turned these Silver Valencias into offensive powerhouses that could lop off the limb of any mech with a single heavy chop!

If the Devil Razors focused on mobility, reliability and endurance, the Silver Valencias focused less on the latter two in exchange for a greater amount of raw power and a bit more protection.

While it was true that the Silver Valencias incorporated compressed armor, both their thickness and their quality didn't appear to be of good quality.

The thinness of their plates cut down the weight, allowing the Silver Valencias to maintain their advantage in mobility, while the average quality of its composition pushed down the costs and made it possible for them to be produced in the frontier.

Ves liked to estimate the selling price of a mech even if they had never been commercially sold, but he found it difficult to pin down the exact value of the Silver Valencia. They looked deceptively simple, so simple in fact that he couldn't believe that this was all a Journeyman Mech Designer was capable of designing.

If he judged their value solely through his observations, he pinned their value at around 50 million credits. Both his Blackbeak and his Crystal Lord designs sold for more than that, so Ves felt very skeptical about his latest judgement.

A seasoned Journeyman like Mayra would never design something so simple as the signature mech of the Swordmaidens.

"There's something more about these Silver Valencias." He mused.

"Otherwise, you Swordmaidens wouldn't value them so much."

"Wouldn't you like to know?" Ketis teased with a naughty grin. "The Silver Valencias are our trump cards. It won't do for us to reveal what they are capable of. There's nothing around us right now that warrants showing them off. Anyway, Mayra is just ahead. Let's go!"

The pair picked up the pace, though that was mostly due to Ketis' boundless enthusiasm. Ever since she defined her design philosophy, she became a lot more cheerful at times. It was like she was a little girl surrounded by toys.

"Mayra! Look who's come to visit!"

"Ves. Good to see you in the flesh once again."

"Mayra." He simply greeted her as he observed their surroundings.

The Journeyman appeared to be designing a handful of optimizations for her Silver Valencias. Because of the sensitive nature of its full design, she quickly swiped her arm, causing the projections wink out of sight.

Ves found it regretful to lose sight of the full design schematics, but he respected her desire for privacy. It was bad form for a mech designer to snoop on another mech designer's work without permission.

It was one thing to analyze a mech by observing their finished frames. It was another thing entirely to access their private design schematics and specifications.

"So, what brings you to Swordmaiden territory?"

"Oh, I wanted to talk shop with the only mech designer who is better than me. My subordinates over at the Vandals aren't exactly the brightest mech designers that I've ever met. I'd like to exchange some ideas on how we can better cope with the heavy gravity."

"Understandable." She said in an elegant fashion that belied her frontier origins. She patted an armored hand over one of the seats at her side. "Come. Let's sit down and discuss."

Ves did so even as he did a double take of Mayra. He had always found her a bit too talented and refined to be a daughter of the frontier. That reminded him

that he had never dug too deep in her background before she accepted Commander Lydia's offer to join her Swordmaidens.

He beheld her straight posture. Even clad in a suit of medium combat armor decorated with the trophies of her own kills, her entire form possessed an indistinct quality that reminded him of nobility.

As Ketis was about to sit, Mayra interrupted her with a raised palm. "Ketis dear, could you fetch me the gift I prepared for your wonderful teacher?"

"Didn't you intend to hand it over after inviting him to a ceremony?"

"I did, but the difficult conditions of Aeon Corona VII doesn't leave us with a lot of opportunities to hold a ceremony. Since Ves is already here, I might as well hand it over now."

"If you say so."

Once Ketis scampered off to wherever Mayra stashed her gift, Ves turned to the older mech designer with an appraising eye. "You wanted to send Ketis away."

"I did. Now that she's off, we can discuss her upbringing under you. I must say, I am very impressed with your efforts. What you managed to accomplish is beyond my expectations. Not only have you enlightened her to the values and principles held by the prevailing institutions of mech design, you also did more than that."

"I enjoyed the teaching process." He replied with a proud smile. "I know what you wanted me to do, but I wasn't satisfied with that. While she's your protege, she's my student as well, and if I see something lacking, I won't hesitate to address those shortcomings."

"What you did was risky as well." Mayra pointedly said. Her eyes grew sharp and Ves somehow felt an indomitable amount of pressure build up around

him. It even triggered his sixth sense! "As her teacher, you wielded an inordinate amount of influence in her future development. You had the power to point her in any direction you wanted. If you hadn't allowed her to choose her own direction, I would have taken offense at your initiative."

Ves awkwardly laughed in response. He knew that some of his actions had been a little too presumptive for his own good. "You placed Ketis under me, so obviously you wanted me to influence her in the first place. I won't deny that I have steered her closer to what an orthodox mech designer ought to think, but I think that it will eventually give her a leg up against other pirate designers."

"And her design philosophy?"

"I can promise you I did not nudge her in any direction with regards to her successful attempt to discover and define her own design philosophy." He said firmly, even under this formless pressure. "If I was in charge, I would have never limited her to focusing her entire mech career on swordsman mechs. She decided on her own to work with the type of mechs she loved the most, and to focus on pursuing the greatest degree of sharpness for their swords."

After a few seconds of silence, the pressure suddenly lifted. Mayra threw a small but satisfied smile at him. "Thank you for your honesty. I have already observed from Ketis that you haven't abused your power over her, but it is good to hear some confirmation from your own mouth."

Ves reciprocated her smile. He did not take offense at her probe. "If she was my protege, I would have been just as thorough."

Chapter 779 Disillusioned

"There is one more topic I'd like to address before my protege returns." The purple-haired, purple-skinned mech designer said.

If not for her human heritage, Ves would have mistaken her as an alien.

"Speak." Ves gestured her to go ahead.

"I know you have been wondering why we are here. It is a question that is quietly weighing on everyone's minds."

Ves carefully nodded. "I have questions, yes, but no one seems willing to answer."

"That is because they don't know or are compelled to keep their mouths shut. Even I can't tell you what we are after, only that our efforts will be worth it if we manage to secure our objectives."

"That's exactly the kind of vague answer that everyone is regaling me with. They tell me it's worth it, that our sacrifices will be meaningful, that we are pursuing a great and important cause. I don't know what to believe anymore."

The momentous effort and the high degree of secrecy involved in this hunt made Ves more and more skeptical about its entire purpose. He even started questioning what Calabast said back then at Harkensen I.

Did everyone really pursue something as banal as high-grade life-prolonging treatment serum? Though its value indeed surpassed the GDP of several states like the Bright Republic put together, Ves did not have any proof to support this belief except for the word of a foreign, professional spy.

Someone like that wasn't exactly the most reliable source of information.

Over time, he realized that he had given in to his biases when Calabast initially made her revelation. Just because he favored one conspiracy theory over another didn't make it any more true.

So for now, Ves didn't know what to think.

For her part, Mayra appeared sympathetic. "These questions will be answered in due time, but you must have patience. Even I don't have the full picture. To be honest, before we received this mission, Commander Lydia has never

revealed that her Swordmaidens belonged to someone else. As a dear friend, I thought I knew her. I was wrong."

"You mean you never thought the Swordmaidens had a backer?"

"Indeed. Strange, is it not? Commander Lydia is a force to be reckoned with. Every Swordmaiden of the first generation thought she was starting something great. She regaled us with dreams of elevating the status of women in the frontier by raising the strongest all-female pirate force in the Faris Star Region. For decades, we fought and bled for that dream, only to find out that a shadowy man from civilized space had been pulling our strings all along."

Ves started to feel that this conversation had taken a dangerous turn all of a sudden. His vigilance increased even as Mayra remained poised and elegant, as if she was discussing the weather.

"Are you dissatisfied with the Swordmaidens?"

"The Swordmaidens? Of course not!" She smiled briefly before frowning. "It is Commander Lydia who I am starting to get disillusioned with. How would you feel if the strong leader who we have all invested in turns out to be a puppet being pulled by someone else's strings? We all thought that founding and developing the Swordmaidens was an end in itself, only for us to find out that we are merely tools for someone else to use at their convenience."

"Well, if you put it that way, it doesn't look very good. Still, it's very hard to achieve anything in this galaxy by yourself. Almost every strong outfit is backed by someone. Do you think I voluntarily joined this wild goose chase? If I had a choice, I would have rather stayed home and quietly design more mechs to round out my mech catalog."

Well, Ves may not be entirely true just now. While he hated being dragged all the way up to the deep frontier and be forced to accompany the ground forces

to the surface of a planet that by all accounts appeared to be as dangerous as Groening IV, a small part of him felt different.

He enjoyed the new sights. He enjoyed experiencing something wholly different. Ves felt pretty certain that he became a much better mech designer now than if he had never been dragged through this journey by the Flagrant Vandals.

So in a way, he felt blessed to be a part of this unique adventure, even as he inwardly screamed in fear at the threats he faced.

"We can wax about the nature of how the galaxy is run, but time is short and we have work to do." Mayra dismissively waved her armored hand. "Before Ketis returns, I want to ask another favor of you. As you know, this mission may turn out to be very perilous. If worse comes to worst, I'd like to arrange some contingencies before that happens."

"You want to arrange an escape plan?"

"Yes, but not for myself. I'm too old, and I'm too attached to Commander Lydia. Even if she is driving us to our deaths, I will accompany her in whatever hell she intrudes upon."

"That.. doesn't make sense."

"Even if Lydia's Swordmaidens is founded upon a lie, every Swordmaiden believes in the causes it espouses. If there is an opportunity to turn a lie into a truth, we are compelled to see the transformation through."

Ves heard the conviction in her voice, and the conflict hiding within. Mayra spent too much time with Commander Lydia that even if her mind recognized that the pirate leader intended to use them up, the Journeyman's heart didn't allow her to turn her back on her sisters.

He mentally applauded Commander Lydia's means of securing Mayra's loyalty. The shrewd founder of the Swordmaidens indoctrinated her subordinates so well that they couldn't betray her even if they all thought it was best to do so.

Ves wanted to dig into their history and learn from the commander's methods so he could apply them to his own subordinates once the war had ended!

"It sounds like you don't hold much confidence in your success." He remarked.

"If you know as much as I know, you wouldn't be so calm either, Ves. The risks are great and there is a chance the Swordmaidens may cease to exist at the end of this ride. If that happens... I want you to take care of Ketis."

Ah. Ves knew that Mayra didn't express her doubts without a reason. It all built up to this request.

"You want me to set her up elsewhere in the frontier? Bring her to Malligan's Pitstop so she can take refuge under the Skull Architect?"

"No." Mayra shook her head. "My mentor may care a little about me, but my protege is nothing to him. He is very particular in his treatment to those he finds worthy or not. Those who earned his respects are taken care of, while those he regards as lessers won't be able to earn even a scrap of his attention."

"Then where do you want me to put her? If I recall, the Omen of Misfortune owes us a lot of favors."

"They are indeed a viable choice, but I have a better idea. I want you to take her under your wing and assimilate her into civilized space."

"What? Are you sure about that? The frontier is her home!"

Of all the possible requests Mayra could utter, Ves had never thought she wanted to bring her protege out of the region she called her home.

"The frontier is her home, that is true, but it is a dangerous home." Mayra said. "If the Swordmaidens are ever wiped out from existence, most of our long-standing ties with the other pirates become as worthless as scrap paper. If Ketis is all alone without the protection of the rest of us Swordmaidens, she becomes easy prey to any pirate gang that needs a mech designer. As fierce as she is with her sword, it's impossible for her to fend off against an entire gang."

This illustrated the fate of those who possessed an abundant amount of skill but lacked the strength to safeguard their independence. Something like this would never happen in most parts of civilized space, but the frontier played by different rules.

"I can't give you a guarantee. My actual power and influence is limited. The Flagrant Vandals are part of the military, and they have rules they must abide to. Even so, I promise I'll do my best to setup a new life for her if the Swordmaidens are no more."

Mayra smiled in satisfaction. "I'm pleased to have your agreement. Here is something that you'll need in order to facilitate her potential entry into civilized space."

The Journeyman passed a secure data chip to Ves. He inserted it into the slot connected to his secure comm and briefly glanced at its contents.

"These are identity documents!"

The data chip contained a raft of forged documents purportedly from various institutions of the Reinald Republic. It presented a complete record of a fake individual, and ran from birth certificates to medical records to school diplomas.

Ves became extremely impressed at the thoroughness of the records, especially since many of them involved the cooperation of both government officials and purported witnesses. The medical records especially demanded tissue samples to be slipped into Reinald's highly-guarded vaults.

The amount of people that had to be bribed to construct such an elaborate background must have surpassed a hundred! Many of them must have demanded hundreds of thousands or even millions of Marks to obtain their cooperation!

The most impressive forgery among the fake documents was undoubtedly a diploma from the Harkensen Capital Institute on Harkensen II, which was a university equivalent to his own alma mater.

While it may not be the best school for mech design in the Reinald Republic, the HCI enjoyed a stellar reputation and a lot of influential government officials graduated from this storied place.

Mayra threw a weary smile at Ves as he tried to estimate how much it cost to put this all together. "I've spent a majority of my life savings on obtaining a nearly foolproof background for Ketis in civilized space. Anything can be bought for the right price, but if you want something done correctly, be prepared to bleed."

"This.. is really extravagant. Why not resort to a cheaper option and have Ketis assume the identity of someone who is lost or dead in the frontier?"

"Such measures are cheap, but they are hardly foolproof. Any individual has family, friends, colleagues and teachers. The moment one of them finds out that the person who impersonated the deceased is a fake, the entire charade will fall apart."

Basically, you got what you paid for. Even if Mayra must have spent an excess of hundreds of millions of bright credits worth of money, she managed

to secure a virtually faultless future in civilized space for a daughter of the frontier.

Still, the huge effort Mayra had went through to secure this escape route for her protege baffled him. "Why spend so much for Ketis? Not that I disapprove. It's just..."

"Excessive? Nonsense. If she is just my student, then my preparations seem excessive. However, I don't see her that way anymore. To me, she is my daughter, if not in blood, then in spirit. As her adoptive parent, I won't hesitate to sacrifice my entire wealth to give her a good future."

Mayra's declaration warmed his heart and eased his suspicion. It figured that Mayra developed motherhood instincts for her favored student. He understood her willingness to go so far for an adoptive daughter because he was the recipient of such treatment himself from his father.

A parent's love for their offspring was one of the strongest forces in the galaxy. Both humans and aliens exhibited a strong degree of protectiveness to their later generation.

Ves carefully removed the data chip from his secure comm and inserted it into a customized slot in his Earth Ant that served as a dedicated storage compartment for small, high-value objects.

With that done, Ketis quickly returned with a rectangular case and presented it to Ves. "Here's your gift!"

He looked curiously at the box. What gift did Mayra prepare for him, and why did she prepare one in the first place?

"Go ahead, Ves." The older mech designer said. "Open it up. Consider it a little bonus for your efforts so far."

Chapter 780 Cadisis

When Ves opened the decorative box, he looked at the object resting on a bed of soft, folded fabric.

"Is that a knife?"

Ves picked up the plain but serviceable hilt of the knife and drew it out of its sheath. The gleam of its slender alloy blade shone in a similar luster as the greatswords wielded by most of the Swordmaidens.

"It's a curiosity crafted by the same swordsmith we commission all of our swords from. I don't know how he does it, but he crafts the sharpest bladed implements in the Faris Star Region." Mayra explained. "Be careful with the blade and tip! Don't run your fingers over the edge. It can cut right through most alloys with just a moderate application of force. Even your fancy armor won't survive against this weapon."

Ves hastily drew back his armored fingers from the edge of the knife. "Does it have a name?"

"Cadisis, the Backstabber. The stiletto design lends itself great for penetrating sturdy armor. As long as you maintain it well, it can pierce through thin sheets of compressed alloy. If nothing else, it's narrow and compact enough that you can slip it inside your custom armor."

"I'll have to expand one of the storage compartments to fit the Cadisis, but it is definitely worth it. If this blade is of the same nature as your famous swords, then this is a sumptuous gift!"

"To be honest, we received the Cadisis as a gift from the aforementioned swordsmith. While we appreciated the gesture, we have found no use for this weapon." The Journeyman admitted. "The Swordmaidens fight our opponents openly and try to make ourselves trustworthy in the eyes of our allies. Making

use of the Cadisis clashes with the rest of our armaments and sends the wrong message."

"And you figured I'm enough of a bastard that the Cadisis is a good fit for me?"

"I imply no such thing." Mayra brushed away the accusation with a flick of her hand. "I am merely taking into consideration your lack of combat training. Even if I gift you with a combat knife, you're liable to cut yourself before you ever inflict a wound upon your opponent. Armed or not, you won't amount to anything against a trained warrior."

Ves studied the Cadisis carefully and sensed his Spirituality brushing against the faint concepts embedded within. As a weapon on the same tier as the iconic swords wielded by all of the graduated Swordmaidens, every aspect of its design screamed quality. The swordsmith that fashioned the Cadisis put a lot of care and effort into creating the perfect backstabbing implement.

The more he studied the weapon, the more he became puzzled why the Swordmaidens obtained this weapon. It truly wasn't a weapon suited to its former owners. Had the swordsmith attempted to convey a hidden message with this gift?

"Since this is a handcrafted weapon made with care and love, is there something special about it besides its sharpness?" He asked. "I don't quite recognize these alloys. They look similar to the ones incorporated in your swords, but they feel different."

Mayra clapped and smiled. "Good judgement. The entire Cadisis incorporates a small amount of exotics that renders it nearly undetectable from most sensors. While it isn't stealthed against optical sensors, you can sneak it past most forms of weapon detectors, metal detectors, mass detectors and etcetera. The Cadisis isn't called the Backstabber for nothing."

While Ves truly appreciated the craftsmanship of the Cadisis, he didn't know if he'd ever be able to make use of it. After all, he already possessed another named weapon that was already powerful enough to take care of most threats. He also couldn't quite figure out why Mayra chose to gift him a weapon that symbolized betrayal right after he made a promise to take care of Ketis.

He had a feeling the entire act of gifting was suffused with symbolism and hidden meanings. Was Mayra attempting to hint to him that the Swordmaidens planned to betray the Vandals down the line? Did she give him the weapon as a silent warning of what might happen to him if he failed to carry out his promises?

Whatever the case, Ves couldn't figure it out right now. He resheathed the weapon and placed it back in the box before closing it. He needed to make some adjustments to his Earth Ant in order to carry the Cadisis. He may not yet have figured out a use for this gift, but there was no harm in adding another tool to his toolbox.

"Ah, with all of this talk, I almost forgot about why I came to visit in the first place." Ves said. "I'd like to consult you on some of the technical issues that the Vandals have encountered. I'd like to ask for advice, is that alright?"

"Feel free to ask. The problems that you Vandals are suffering from are hardly unique." Mayra remarked while gesturing Ketis to come sit next to her. "Ketis, come over here. Perhaps you can provide some input as well."

Ves proceeded to explain some of the more difficult issues he encountered, such as how to modify the cockpits so that its pilots could stay conscious even without an active antigrav field.

For the most part, Mayra gave out sage advice. While she didn't have a solution for every problem, she at least pointed him in the right direction, or forced him to look at the problem from a different perspective.

Ketis for the most part stayed silent as she lacked the experience to provide suggestions on her own. The issues plaguing Ves went far beyond her capacity to solve. Still, at least she soaked up lots of knowledge from their mutual exchange.

After two hours of fruitful discussion, Ves bid the pair goodbye and exited the workshop. As he returned to the Vandal side of the camp, he continued to admire the various mechs employed by the Swordmaidens.

The Devil Razors and the Silver Valencias joined several other mech models that carried Mayra's distinctive mark. Compared to the mechs that the Swordmaidens must have procured elsewhere, Mayra's work all carried a common refrain that enabled Ves to puzzle out the woman's design philosophy.

"If I'm not mistaken, her design philosophy has something to do with making the best out of suboptimal materials. Mayra's mechs may not be the most impressive for a Journeyman mech Designer, but they are very efficient and cost-effective."

To Ves, her design philosophy echoed some of the design philosophies of both the Skull Architect and Master Katzenberg from the Leemar Institute of Technology. It was an extremely suitable design philosophy for a mech designer who operated in the frontier where many resources couldn't readily be obtained.

In general, design philosophies that focused on increasing efficiency and mitigating the scarcity of high-quality materials should be very common in the galactic rim.

As a region blessed with less stars and a much lower concentration of rare and energetic exotics, mech designers didn't so much focus on developing the strongest mech designs. They simply couldn't afford to. Instead, they focused on maximizing the performance of their mech designs with the resources at hand.

Some pursued this goal more directly, such as Master Katzenberg who actively pursued cheap substitutes for higher value exotics, or the Skull Architect who sought to square the circle by focusing on pure design.

Others approached this problem from an oblique angle. Master Olson's specialty in longevity, endurance and engine design allowed her to design mechs that lasted for days on the battlefield and lessened the logistical pressure of the forces that deployed her products.

Ves fell into this category as well. His design philosophy chased after the X-Factor, a largely unexplored source of power of mechs that amplified their performance without costing anything but a portion of his Spirituality.

"Each of us are pursuing methods of strengthening mechs without straight-up resorting to more expensive materials."

Personally, he felt that this approached the essence of good design. Any mech designer could produce a stellar-performing mech with materials worth billions of credits. It took an amazing mech designer to design a mech that performed just as well with a budget that was a hundred times smaller.

As Ves returned to the camp, he found his assigned bunk and tried to sleep over the issues.

He had a fitful sleep. While the prefab barracks blocked out all of the light shining from above, the constantly-flowing astral winds sometimes caused space and time in the vicinity to ripple a bit. By the time the ripples reached

the rocky surface of the Super Earth, their effects had diminished, but every Vandal and Swordmaiden still felt their effects.

It felt like his body was getting blasted by invisible sound waves every two minutes or so. It took some time for Ves to fall to sleep under those conditions. Some of the other Vandals had to take sleeping pills to do so.

The next day, the same bright skies greeted him again as he went back to work. By now, the Vandals set up a series of workshops where mech technicians performed continuous repairs on mechs that they thought should have been able to withstand the heavy gravity but actually couldn't.

No one was to blame for the faults, but it reflected an unfortunate lack of competence in preparing them for deployment on a Super Earth. Too many of the work crews had been rather lackadaisical in implementing the full raft of modifications suggested by Ves.

The only reason why this hadn't grown into a bigger issue was that enough landbound mechs still worked as expected to be sent out on regular patrols and reconnaissance missions. Right now, the Vandals and the Swordmaidens still needed to finish their preparations before they could begin their trek.

As Ves applied some of the solutions suggested by Mayra in problems such as modifying the cockpits so that the piloting seats could recline, Captain Byrd finally scheduled her first staff meeting.

As Ves put down his work and entered the nearby headquarters bunker, he entered a cramped, underground conference room. A host of new and familiar Vandals entered the room, with the mech officers congregating on one side of the room while the various support personnel dominated the other side.

Captain Byrd entered last.

This was the first time Ves saw her in person. She was older than Captain Orfan, who glared at her fellow mech captain with jealous eyes. Captain Byrd

took no notice of the brash captain's attention and walked to the front of the conference room in a steady gait.

"Alright Vandals. I've called you here today to discuss our immediate plans for the future. Our progress so far is slower than I like, but we should be ready to move within two or three weeks."

A couple of Vandals groaned. That was far too slow for the more aggressive Vandals such as Captain Orfan. If she was in charge, she would have exhorted them to move despite their lack of preparations.

Captain Byrd approached their circumstances from an entirely different angle. Some people thought that she went overboard.

Ves didn't agree with her critics. As someone who appreciated good preparation, he fully supported her slow and steady approach. He'd rather bring too much tools and not need most of them than to bring an empty toolbox and find himself helpless without any means to solve the problem.

"This meeting does not revolve around the plans that we've already made. They are set in stone and none of it is negotiable." The ranking officer said.

Though she didn't look at Captain Orfan and her buddies, the remark hadn't been pointed anywhere but to the aggressive faction.

"Instead, our scouts sent out to the nearest settlement have returned with detailed footage and sensor readings. Behold the ancient city that is situated six-hundred kilometers southwest from our camp."

A projection came to life, depicting an old and half-crumbling city surrounded by a massive rusting metal wall!