

Chapter 691 Mortose System

The Flagrant Swordmaiden fleet emerged at the edge of the Mortose Star System. The name received its name from a treasure hunter who once visited this system and profited hugely from a discovery on the only habitable planet in the system.

Just before the transition, Ves had been supervising his student's attempt at fashioning a miniature mech by hand.

Denied the use of an assembly system, Ketis resorted to using her hands along with precision tools to put the tiny parts together. The work required a lot of mental effort because she needed to perform most actions manually rather than let some bots do the work in her stead.

Ves considered this activity as a way to train her severely-neglected assembly skills. A mech designer who couldn't assemble their own mechs was a disgrace to their craft, though he knew not every mech designer thought the same.

Those mech designers could suck it. As long as Ketis studied under him, he would impart her with his own principles, no matter how controversial they might be in the mech industry.

"Arrgh!" The woman burst out as she slammed her fist against the tabletop, causing Ves to wince. "This stupid tool doesn't do what I want! How can it be so imprecise?!"

The impact served as a detriment to her ongoing project, as the vibrations had almost certainly disarrayed the alignment of some of the delicate miniature connections she was in the process of establishing.

One of his big pet peeves were mech designers and mech technicians who had a tendency to lash out physically whenever they suffered a setback. Not

only did the outburst accomplish nothing useful, it also damaged the very machines they tried to piece together!

Still, Ves decided to confront Ketis on her bad habit another time. Right now, the fleet would almost be transitioning out of FTL.

"You're getting closer to assembling a working miniature. Your progress is quite decent. I remember at the start where all the parts came off the 3D printer with distorted dimensions."

She grimaced at the memory of that embarrassment. "Don't remind me of that!"

"However, you need to work on proficiency with these precision hand tools. It's obvious that this is the first time you've used them. Have you even read their manuals?"

"What manuals?"

"No wonder." Ves sighed. "Those precision tools aren't as shallow as a simple wrench or as intuitive to figure out as a ubiquitous multitool. They are machines in themselves, machines designed to assemble other machines."

"So what?"

"Anything that I call a machine is complex enough to be worth reading the instructions that come with them. Neglecting to do so will lead to incorrect handling, which will spoil the outcome you've been trying to achieve all along. You were doomed from the start to fail."

"Why didn't you tell me earlier?!"

"Are you such a child that I need to hold your hand each time you go astray? The lesson cuts deepest when you eventually fall flat from your own bad choices. It hurts to be wrong, to fail in an endeavor you tried so hard to succeed. Yet the pain is essential in teaching you right from wrong. You're

less likely to fall when you perform the same actions tomorrow, once you read the manuals of course."

Ketis glowered at him, but Ves took no notice of her frustrations. He cared more about unlearning some of the misconceptions she developed during her time with the Swordmaidens. Just because the slaves took up the responsibility of fabricating and servicing mechs, didn't mean the work was beneath a mech designer like her. On the contrary. Ketis should be much more proficient in performing the same kind of work!

Knowing how to fabricate a mech entirely by herself would be a massive boost to her in the future. She could easily take over running a mech workshop from Mayra once she became more familiar with the craftsmanship aspect of being a mech designer.

Not that she appreciated his intentions. Not yet. But she will. Ves grinned devilishly at his student. The act of designing a mech designer amused him a lot, and it served as a nice distraction from his own intensive studies.

"Stow away the gear and dump the partially completed miniature in the recycling bin. You're going to have to do the same routine all over if you want to create a product that's closer to a workable condition."

She seemed partial to her creation, though. She hugged it against her chest like a precious doll. "B-But my budget is running out! I only have one more chance to complete a miniature mech!"

"That's your fault for not being thorough enough and for biting more than you can chew. Will your Swordmaidens accept a botched mech from you? Are your principles so feeble that you would hand over a mech that could malfunction at any time to your comrades and sisters?"

"..No. I would never do that."

"That's why I'm telling you to chuck that failed attempt into the bin." He explained. "This might be practice for you, but it's also a way to instill you with the diligence you need to become a qualified mech designer."

Once she cleared the worktable and stowed away her tools, they exited the workshop compartment and headed to the upper decks. They passed by the armory and retrieved their personal sets of armor from the lockers before changing in them. Many Vandals had already changed into their suits of armor, leaving only a couple of stragglers alongside Ves and Ketis to adorn their personal protection.

You could never be too sure of the threats in the frontier.

Ves was glad that his suit of light combat armor lost the cape and most of its ridiculous surface embellishments. Among the Vandals, he had no need to puff himself up as a noble among pirates.

Naturally, Ketis still wore her exaggerated suit of heavy combat armor that was littered with tribal markings, exobeast bones and other savage accoutrements. Along with her greatsword, she looked as if she walked straight out of a drama that took place in the past when humanity thought that Old Earth was still flat.

"Let's go to the command center."

They entered the heavily-guarded command center where dozens of specialists and officers manned the consoles. Most of them didn't have anything to do yet due to the enforced isolation of every ship in the fleet and the general futility in trying to make sense of the environment during FTL travel.

Each wearing a suit of combat armor despite the inconvenience they brought with them, all the Vandals readied themselves for action the instant the Flagrant Swordmaidens exited the higher dimensions.

The transition came violently, causing both man and machine to lurch. It affected Ves a bit more severely than others due to his physical abnormalities, but he had become somewhat accustomed to suppressing his urge to vomit.

It was a big disaster to vomit inside a vacuum-sealed suit of armor!

A few seconds passed as the crew picked themselves up and diligently performed their pre-planned assignments.

"Every starship of the Flagrant Vandals are accounted for, sir! All of them have transmitted their status to us. None have reported any incidents during FTL travel."

"Sir, our sensors failed to pick up any signals or emissions within the vicinity of our fleet so far!"

"That's not good enough!" Major Verle barked to the sensor officer. "I want to know everything that is going on within a one AU radius around our fleet. Get to it!"

A half a minute later, the sensor officer finally barked out the report they were all waiting for. "Sir, we've picked up a swarm of transponder signals from the inner system! Many of them appear to be transmitted by independent pirate vessels!"

A plot of the local system projected into view and displayed the exact location of the ships present in Mortose. While the ships of the Vandals and the Swordmaidens emerged in the outer slice of the star system, a large but haphazard collection of pirate vessels orbited around Mortose I, the only habitable planet revolving around the main sequence star in the center.

Though encountering a mob of pirate vessels should have been an alarming occurrence, in fact the Flagrant Swordmaidens already expected their presence.

"Is the Temple of Haatumak among the pirate vessels?"

"Yes sir! Our long-ranged sensors have confirmed that she's the largest starship in orbit of Mortose I. She's almost as large as a fleet carrier!"

They expected the presence of the massive Temple of Haatumak. As her name suggested, she served as a literal place of worship to a frontier cult that worshipped a god referred to as Haatumak.

Most Vandals expressed contempt when they first heard about the cult. What were the odds the original founders of the cult invented this 'god' and converted followers in a cynical attempt at fleecing them of their valuables?

Whatever the case, the worship of Haatumak fared better in the frontier than many other cults and two-bit religions due to one unique advantage that was normally in the hands of the big two pirate blocs.

The cultists somehow found a way to hamper the tracking abilities of the sandmen aliens.

As the good-natured cultists that they were, they sold their services to independents who desperately wanted to minimize their chances of getting caught by the sandmen energy hunters that constantly roamed this region of space. Of course, the Haatumak cultists charged a good price for their services, and constantly tried to convert their customers into worshipping their gods.

Due to the size of the combined fleet of Vandals and Swordmaidens, the odds of attracting the attention of the sandmen was very high. They desperately needed the help of the Temple of Haatumak in order to minimize the odds of encountering this implacable alien race. Fighting them was always a chore, and they never yielded any useful materials when they 'died'.

Commander Lydia had been the one to propose visiting the Temple of Haatumak as their first priority when crossing into the frontier. She happened

to have her hands on a yearlong schedule of the Temple's journey through the untamed stars.

As the Vandals in the command center reported nothing but routine matters, Major Verle ordered Captain Rakeshir to coordinate with his Swordmaiden counterpart and collectively make their way towards Motose I.

"What can you tell me about the Temple of Haatumak?" Ves quietly asked Ketis. As a daughter of frontier, the Temple shouldn't be foreign to her.

"She's an ugly monstrosity that the fanatics managed to cobble together in a space worthy ship. I don't know why they need all that space, as they don't have the numbers to make use of all that volume. She's the one and only temple to Haatumak. Don't ask me about their beliefs, I don't have a clue what they are. The fanatics are possessive of their god."

"They never disseminated their beliefs in public?" Ves raised his eyebrow.

"Yeah. You need to be inducted into their ranks before you know what you're getting into. The secrecy surrounding their faith doesn't make them very popular."

Ves frowned a bit. A religion that didn't try hard enough to attract worshippers eventually fell into obscurity. "How is the Temple of Haatumak able to stay aloft?"

"Well, the service they offer is one reason. Another reason is that nobody is willing to harm them as long as they sell their abilities in public. If the Temple goes down, the independents have nowhere else to go but the Dragon or Ravienne Alliance if they want to obtain a blessing that hides their ships from the sandmen."

That explained the swarm of pirate vessels orbiting loosely around the Temple of Haatumak. Normally, they couldn't stand to be in each other's vicinity, but

now they had gathered around the Temple in a mutual pact to protect her from malicious threats!

"For something as valuable as the ability to hide our ships from the sandmen's long-ranged detectors, they must be charging a very high price to perform their service." He noted dimly. "How much will it cost us?"

"It's... complicated." She replied as her face adopted a mixed expression. "They offer a ruinously expensive price if you want to obtain their blessings with the least amount of hassle. The exact price depends on the size and class of ship, but on average they charged about fifty K-bars per ship the last time we stopped by the Temple."

Ves almost vomited again when he heard that price. "Fifty K-bars is worth as much as an Inheritor mech! To bless the entire Vandal fleet, we'll need to cough up enough money to erect a mech company's worth of Inheritors!"

"That's why nobody is willing to pay such an excessive price. Luckily, the fanatics offer other ways to pay, though the alternatives... well, you should see it for yourself when we get there."

Chapter 692 Temple of Haatumak

As the Flagrant Swordmaidens neared Mortose I, their sensors managed to resolve the Temple of Haatumak in her full glory.

When Ves initially heard the secretive cult cobbled up the Temple of Haatumak in a massive starfaring ship and house of worship in one, he expected something like six massive cargo haulers welded into a single abomination.

A cargo hauler basically looked like a set of massive cargo holds thinly held together by the thin superstructure of a ship. To shipwrights, their design exemplified the pursuit of maximizing cargo space while incorporating the minimum amount of structure necessary to keep it all together.

The Temple.. resembled something greater than that. The outer hull must have been a Swordmaiden's wet dream, because she consisted entirely of bones of a massive leviathan-like alien that spanned at least two kilometers if the sensors estimated her size correctly!

"She's a near-capital floating temple chimera ship!" Someone uttered. Others would argue that length-wise she already qualified as a capital ship.

Though the word salad may not have done the savage and crudely fashioned temple ship justice, it certainly described her accurately enough at a single glance. She was a pure expression of the savagery and idolatry that the sons and daughters of the frontier so revered.

Lydia's Swordmaidens could only be regarded as posers in front of the real thing!

"From which creature did those bones come from?"

"Maybe they came from an exobeast that evolved on a gas giant!"

The speculation briefly disrupted the tranquility of the command center. Everyone couldn't help it. Though the Vandals witnessed larger ships before, many of them never saw a chimera ship before.

She was jaw-droppingly crude, but emanated a sense of majesty as well!

The vaguely whale-like set of bones with a lot of eerie limbs attached from the flanks encompassed a core of what used to be cargo haulers. Obviously, the worshippers of Haatumak had done their best to build out and expand, reinforce and even change the inner contours in order to hide their humble origins.

Ves wasn't fooled. He could easily read the traces where the armor covered up the contours of what used to be humble ships that plied the stars while carrying countless tons of goods.

Still, no matter how she started out before, the constant transformations as well as the incorporation of those tough, powerful and intimidating set of bones had given the Temple of Haatumak a status that few vessels in the Komodo Star Sector could match!

The closer the Flagrant Swordmaidens approached, the more the details became clearer to see. The rugged, frontier flavor of the Temple of Haatumak only grew stronger as Ves was able to pick out remains from salvaged ship and mech parts jutting out of the metallic portion of the ship hull.

It was as if the worshippers of Haatumak simply threw a lot of junk at their ship and crudely welded them together!

Certainly, cladding a vessel at least two kilometers long with proper armor cost a huge fortune in K-slates. Even if the Temple of Haatumak raked in a lot of money through rendering their services to the independent pirates, the cost was too prohibitive!

The end result bemused Ves. He appreciated the ingenuity behind her construction. "It's a cheap way to bulk up a ship."

It might be more appropriate for him to regard the Temple of Haatumak as a floating solidified junk yard in engineering terms. Her armor literally consisted of junk, and only acted as armor by dint of their sheer amount.

The immediate consequence of piling up all of that low-quality junk was that the Temple of Haatumak must be one of the most sluggish starships in the Faris Star Region!

While the ponderous bone-covered vessel already settled into a stable orbit around Mortose I, allowing it to swing around the naturally habitable planet with deft speed, everything would change once she started to move out.

Those massive thrusters affixed to the stern of the Temple looked as effective

as trying to move a mech by putting it on a cart with sturdy wheels and trying to pull it with a dozen men.

Slow.

So slow.

How could this Temple still survive the harsh frontier when she was so slow? Certainly, she'd be able to withstand a great deal of punishment, but if the sandmen dropped into the Mortose System with a significant sandmen fleet, then that moving junkyard of a ship would never be able to get away in time!

When Ves posed the question to Ketis, she returned a surprising response.

"As far as the Swordmaidens are aware of, the Temple of Haatumak has never been attacked by the sandmen."

"How is that possible?!" He whispered back. "The barely sentient sand-like aliens are indiscriminate when it comes to harvesting high-quality energy! A big vessel like the Temple might not contain as much energy as a proper fleet carrier, but she's still enough to sate the sandmen for quite a while!"

Ketis had no answer to that. "Don't ask me. Let alone Commander Lydia or Mayra, even I don't know what's going on with the fanatics. They're really weird and creepy. Mayra told me they were exiled to the frontier several hundred years ago because civilized space didn't want them and their weird beliefs. The Temple of Haatumak on the projector is actually the third temple they constructed!"

"What happened to the previous two Temples? Did they get destroyed?"

"No. They just.. rusted away and degraded over time. They became too outdated even for the frontier."

There was definitely something fishy going on with this strange religion. From the moment Ves beheld the current manifestation of their place of worship, the sight of her rankled in a way.

The Temple brought back some unwelcome memories from his time at Groening IV to Ves. The majesty radiating from the bones embracing her hull resembled the raw might and unquestioned rule of the Kaius, the huge chimera mech built out of the carcass of a hexapod king.

What was it with crazies and their fascination of incorporating remnants of living creatures into their machine? To Ves, the addition only served to impress the ignorant laymen and show off the remnants as trophies. At least the Skull Architect had a deeper reason for incorporating human bones in his mechs, even if he was misguided.

Still, as much as the bones of long-dead alien exobeasts didn't add much to their performance, the sight of it alone turned what should have been a drab, ugly amalgamation of junk into an impressive frontier starship.

"So in a way, the seemingly superfluous decorations are worth it if they succeed in leaving the desired impression."

The Vandals wouldn't have nearly been so cautious and apprehensive about meeting the cultists if they hadn't embellished their ship like that. In a way, he appreciated her artistry as a craftsman. The sight of the Temple made Ves feel better about his own habit of adding artistic embellishments to his mechs when they didn't exactly impact their performance.

"Ships and mechs are machines, but they are also so much more. Their existence and use is undeniably connected to humans."

Some mech designers believed that mechs should be the purest expression of a war machine. Their designs should be stripped of every superfluous part

and contain only the bare minimum of what they needed to fulfill their missions.

While their ideology sounded somewhat attractive to Ves, he eventually rejected that school of thought because their emphasis on the science of mech design led them to disdain the artistic side of their profession. Art was a necessary evil in order to inject some brand of creativity in their designs, but as soon as they partook the bare minimum, the mech designers shut themselves off to any further irrational impulses.

Their mech designs tended to be boring and drab, but solid performers on the market. Ves described their designs as utilitarian and focused in their conception. A machine or tool designed for only a single purpose, and nothing more.

"Design can be so much more. Who says a product only needs to fulfill a single purpose?"

In any case, hours trickled past as the Flagrant Swordmaiden fleet came nearer and nearer until they were only an hour away from entering their designated orbit around Mortose I.

"Mr. Larkinson." Major Verle spoke out abruptly. The mech officer had been making plans and discussing their approach to the cultists with Commander Lydia all this while. "I would like to hear your insight on the mechs piloted by the members of the Church of Haatumak. Can we defeat them if necessary?"

The fleet had just come close enough to resolve the hundred-odd spaceborn mechs that patrolled around the Temple of Haatumak. Ves had already begun to analyze them once the first detailed scans came through.

"It's possible for the Flagrant Vandals to overcome the patrol mechs at their current state, but it will cost us, sir." Ves replied with a grim face. "That's only the case if we leave out Lydia's Swordmaidens and the chaotic clumps of

pirate mechs deployed from the other pirate carriers. If they all intervene, then even I can't predict the result, other than that we'd be horribly outnumbered."

The independent pirate vessels that volunteered to escort the Temple of Haatumak formed an effective deterrent against anyone wishing to make trouble with the cultists.

Ves inputted some commands in his console which caused the main projector to display three different Haatumak mech models.

"The worshippers of Haatumak employ three distinct mech models, each shaped like bestial or aquatic mechs adapted to spaceborn combat. The first one is this whale or seal-shaped mech."

The biggest and fattest of the mech models grew larger, dominating the available projector space.

"While the mechs are broadcasting their identity and allegiances via transponders, the annoying thing is that they don't mention the name of the mech model. I've never seen anything like their designs before, so it's highly likely the worshippers have developed these mech models in-house."

Sections of the projection of the whale-like mech lit up in red.

"I've taken to calling the biggest and most heavily armed mech model the Gun Whale. It aptly describes their purpose, as the cultists have slapped six integrated limbs that transition into integrated weapon systems above the 'elbow' portion of the limbs. Each limb can bend and rotate in every possible direction, so they're a lot more complex than the run-of-the-mill spaceborn frontline mech."

"Are the weapons formidable?"

"They are, sir." Ves nodded without hesitation. "Don't underestimate them because they aren't as hefty and chunky as heavy mechs. Their firepower can

surpass the output of several average rifleman mechs. "What's worse, their aquatic bestial shapes allows the designer to stuff a lot of systems inside the mech, so you can expect the Gun Whale to hit hard and sustain their rate of fire without suffering too quickly from depletion or heat build-up."

"Counters?"

"They're big and heavy. Just like the Temple of Haatumak, that inevitably makes them slow. I think the original designers didn't care too much about that disadvantage because they envisioned them as the Temple of Haatumak's most staunchest guards. Technically, if a melee mech can fly through the intense rain of firepower it can unleash, it can take complete advantage of the Gun Whale's lack of melee armaments. Basically, even if the Gun Whale weighs as much as a medium space knight, its better to treat it as a heavy mech."

This was all he could figure out in a short amount of time. He had a feeling the unorthodox shape of the Gun Whale hid some other surprises, but the only way to find out was to employ powerful active scanners, which the Temple of Haatumak would certainly consider a hostile act.

"What about the second and third mech models?" Major Verle pressed.

"If the Gun Whale is their defensive fire support platform, the latter two act as the offensive arm of their church."

Chapter 693 Leviathan Remnan

Ves waved his hand, causing the projection of the Gun Whale to minimize and the other two mechs to fill up the air. "The Haatumak mech models that I've designated as the Snapper Dolphin and the Strangler Squid serve as their melee spaceborn combatants."

"Of the two, the most numerous of them consists of the Snapper Dolphin. While their appearance may suggests they are ranged mechs as they have a

pair of laser barrels attached to their flanks, their real purpose is to perform hit and run attacks with their un-dolphin like snapper beaks. I'm not entirely sure of their power, but the extensive musculature that must be hidden underneath its thick neck leads me to suggest they can easily snap an Inheritor mech in half!"

"What are your suggested counters for the Snapper Dolphin?" Major Verle calmly asked.

"Its weaknesses are self-evident. I think any mech officer can figure out a way to counter it considering that its fighting style resembles lancer mechs." Ves shrugged. It wasn't as if these types of spaceborn mechs had never shown up before. "They aren't as well-armored as the Gun Whales, so they rely more on their speed to survive. The dolphin-esque mech frame is fairly inflexible as all of its armaments are permanently directed towards its front. While that makes it a lot stronger than an equivalent humanoid mech in a frontal clash, it can't effectively defend itself from the flanks and rear. Surrounding it or boxing it in with superior numbers is an effective way to leave them with no escape."

Nothing he said sounded anything different from established mech tactics. Ves wasn't a mech officer after all. He only learned some superficial tactics in school and most of his progress in this area came from studying the way the Flagrant Vandals coordinated their mechs and employed their formations.

"And the final mech?"

"The Strangler Squid as I call it is their lightest, fastest and but potentially most lethal mech. It doesn't carry any ranged armaments at all, but it makes up for that with fairly light mass and a powerful flight system augmented with auxiliary boosters. Its main modus operandi seems to close in on a mech and envelop it with its tentacles. I'm not sure what kind of weapon system is hiding in the tentacles, as its articulated construction makes them very poor when

used as a sword or club. My guess is that its limbs are either capable of secreting acid or electrifying anything caught within its grasp."

"Can they be countered in the same way as our Inheritors?"

"Effectively, yes." He nodded, acknowledging the similarities between the Inheritors and the Strangler Squids despite their wildly different shapes and design philosophies. "The Strangler Squids don't suffer the directional weaknesses of the Snapper Dolphins. It's fast, agile and the boosters integrated in the tentacles only enhances their overall mobility during critical moments. Just like the Inheritor, it's a cheap design that prioritizes speed above everything else, to the point of outperforming the humanoid design in this aspect."

The squid shape lent itself well to mobility-focused mech designs. The overall shape of squid-like animals evolved from an aquatic environment, which had more in common with moving in space than moving on land.

The legs of the Inheritor mechs really didn't serve any important purposes except to act as makeshift armor, making it more convenient to move in and out of the hangar bay, and to make mech pilots feel more comfortable about piloting a complete human-shaped mech.

"Are there any other insights you'd like to share about the Haatumak's mechs, Mr. Larkinson?"

He collected his thoughts for a few seconds. He picked up a lot of subtleties from the scans, but the problem was that most of his guesses couldn't easily be substantiated. The data he derived from his analysis might not be very relevant to non-mech designers either.

"All three mech designs from the Church of Haatumek carry the undeniable flavor of a mech designer with an aquatic mech background. The Gun Whale, Snapper Dolphin and Strangler Squids might differ from aquatic mechs with

the inclusion of flight systems and the ability to operate in space, but I bet their behavior and fighting style will largely resemble their aquatic counterparts."

"What should we be cautious about, then?"

"Aquatic mechs are.. hmmm.. linear. Besides the Strangler Squids, you can expect the other two mech models to prefer to move in straight lines and base their tactics around that limitation."

"This does not sound too dissimilar to the conditions facing normal spaceborn mechs." Verle pointed out. As a mech pilot he should know how difficult it was to change the momentum of a mech already flying in space.

Ves couldn't voice much else without causing more confusion, so he refrained from revealing more information.

In truth, he sensed something strange about their designs. Besides the obvious fact that they appear to be designed by an aquatic mech designer who somehow ended up in space, the designs all carried something foreign. The only problem was that Ves couldn't quite pin down what he found so strange about their designs.

Whoever designed those mechs did a good job at hiding anything that Ves could use to define their design philosophy and where they came from. He suspected that the aquatic mech designer might even be a foreigner who fled all the way to the frontier to escape pursuit.

"Have you ever seen the three mech models in action, Ketis?" He asked.

"Are you kidding? Of course not." She shook her head. "The Swordmaidens never stick around if they could help it. The Haatumak worshippers are way too unsettling. It's like you're constantly being stared at by hungry beasts who are waiting to devour your flesh. When you step aboard the Temple, you'll know what I mean."

The appointment the Flagrant Swordmaidens had made with the Church of Haatumak obligated them to send a delegation of representatives to their Temple. Ves and Mayra were both included on the guest list as they were each the highest-ranking mech designers of their respective forces.

Ketis wasn't invited this time, though she didn't appear to be too upset about this missed opportunity.

"Believe me, you really don't want to stay any longer on their Temple than necessary. Stepping on her decks is like walking into a swamp filled with fog. The smell is disorienting and whatever incense they put in the air is practically being cycled throughout the entire ship! Then there's the worshippers themselves..."

She shuddered, as if reliving a bad memory. "Once I saw them face-to-face, I understood why civilized space kicked them out. Even most people here in the frontier don't want them around here. The only reason why they've been allowed to stay is because of their ability to hide our ships from the long-ranged detection methods of the sandmen."

From what Ves had been told, their delegation would arrive with a light guard but in full pirate regalia. That meant that everyone would be wearing the flashiest outfits imaginable.

He thought that religious nuts wouldn't be affected by someone else's appearances, but evidently he was wrong. The worshippers of Haatumak were still human in that sense.

Some time later, the Flagrant Swordmaidens fell into a stable, higher orbit around Mortose I. The unassuming planet looked remarkably like Old Earth, though a bit less lush.

Mortose I had an interesting history. Treasure hunters originally stumbled upon the planet when it still held a completely alien biosphere, but they found that it just required a little push to make it habitable to humans.

They came back later and employed some cheap and dirty methods to turn it into a human-friendly world. They introduced genetically modified alien flora and fauna that aggressively took over everything native.

The indigenous plants and wildlife had never evolved to withstand a threat from outer space! To them, the introduction of human-related species was an outside-context problem that they never prepared any counter-measures for!

The results could be imagined. Within several decades, almost every trace of Mortose I's original lifeforms had been eradicated, and the planet firmly became inhabitable by humans, to some degree.

To this date, the planet hosted various settlements, each numbering tens of thousands of sons and daughters of the frontier. That didn't sound like much, but that allowed them to hide their settlements from both greedy pirates and energy-hungry sandmen.

The Temple of Haatumak evidently conducted some business with the underground settlements, but she would be moving away after some time.

Ves entered the hangar bay and stepped aboard an armored shuttle that carried their complete delegation. Aside from four largely ceremonial guards in slightly gaudy armor, everyone else appeared ready to attend a costume party!

Everyone had been allowed to step aboard the Temple of Haatumak in heavy combat armor or lighter. For obvious reasons, exoskeleton armor was not allowed.

Because nobody thought they stood a chance if the Church of Haatumak turned against them on their own ship, most of the officers opted to pay a visit in light or medium combat armor.

Almost everyone from Major Verle to Chief Engineer Avanaeon wore suits of armor coated in black-and-burgundy and embellished with silver or golden skulls or other inane symbols. The armorers had a lot of fun applying the nonsensical symbols and surrounding them with meaningless frills onto the surface of their armor suits.

Lush capes like the one that Ves had already worn completed the impression that they were a group of high-ranking pirates with delusions of grandeur.

Some of the Vandal officers found their current appearances to be highly embarrassing! None of them managed to adjust to the culture shift of wearing such attention-grabbing outfits. However, they all understood the necessity of adhering to this local custom, as they needed to impress both the Church of Haatumak and the thousands of pirate visitors that for some reason or another stuck around aboard the Temple.

The shuttle lifted off from the flight deck and smoothly exited the hangar into open space. Strapped into his seat, Ves summoned up a small projection from his armrest that displayed a small glimpse of the many ships and mechs in orbit.

The massive shape of the Temple of Haatumak wooshed by for a few seconds.

"Impressive, is she not?" Avanaeon waved his hand at the projection. "They found a two-kilometer long exobeast skeleton that's in pristine condition and managed to build a functional ship out of old cargo haulers and a lot of junk. That's the frontier in a nutshell."

Ves understood his point. The huge Temple showed that you could still build a functional capital ship without a fancy shipyard or a prohibitive amount of expensive resources. However, despite the practicality of her inner structure, the seemingly superfluous skeleton wrapped around her hull was a cultural necessity rather than a technical one!

"What's in fashion in one star sector may not be comprehensible to another star sector. Extending this rule to unclaimed star regions isn't that much of a stretch." Ves replied.

"Fashionable or not, the sooner we get rid of these clown-like suits of armor, the better!"

A chief engineer and a head designer both shouldn't be wearing armor suits in the first place.

While they commiserated on the idiosyncrasies of the frontier, the shuttle began to approach one of the public hangar bays of the Temple of Haatumak. As the distance closed to within a couple of hundred kilometers, Ves briefly paused his chat with Avanaeon after sensing something remarkable from his sixth sense!

His eyes widened and he focused the projection back on the massive vessel. He actually felt something from the ship herself!

"What am I sensing? It's huge! Is it.. The spiritual remnants of that creature?!"

What he sensed was both massive and and decayed to the point of disappearing from this plane of existence entirely. Ves had never sensed something so powerful yet so hollow. A mass of contradictory thoughts flitted through his mind.

Chapter 694 Sacrificial Offering

Ves tried to maintain his composure as the Vandal shuttle touched down on the flight deck next to the shuttle that arrived from the Jaded Sword. He couldn't come up with any conclusion right now.

He suspected that the leviathan-like creature might have been an extraordinary species of exobeasts or even sentient aliens akin to the devoluted aeliotonoc whales he once had the pleasure of seeing on Moira's Paradise. He even enjoyed a steak from the same species!

Trying to compare the flavors he sampled from the spiritually sensitive whales to the massive but stagnant spiritual remnant returned no positive results. The two didn't appear to be related at all.

As Ves mused about the complex flavors he sensed from his sixth sense, the Vandal delegation exited through the hatch of the shuttle and arrived in front of a small greeting party of robed emissaries of the Church of Haatumak.

Everyone retracted their helmets into the neck guard of their varying suits of armor. As guests, they could expect some basic courtesies from the Temple of Haatumak. Being granted the privilege to breathe normal air under normal pressure should be one of them.

Still, some faint sense of wariness urged Ves to unfold his helmet and close his faceplate until his armor hermetically sealed his body from the environment.

He ignored that impulse, though. It would have been terribly undiplomatic of him to act unilaterally like that out of his sense of unease.

As they nestled in the Faris Star Region for over a hundred years, they had fully merged with the customs of the frontier. Every worshipper in sight, which included the flight deck crew, wore some form of light combat armor underneath their garments.

Ves couldn't figure out much about the armor, other than that their contours beneath the robes showed that their wearers added a lot of modular attachments or possessed unique physiques.

The cloth of the hooded robes themselves came in earthy tones, but that was where the mundane ended. Unknown alien script that appeared oddly compelling covered the surface of robes. They weren't static, but rather moved around the cloth as if they were alive.

Sometimes, the script even jumped out of the cloth and took on a three-dimensional shape in the air!

These pulses happened erratically and without rhyme or reason. All of these phenomena added to the mystery surrounding the cultists.

Still, none of the Vandals or the Swordmaidens felt comfortable being in their presence. The closer they got, the more their instincts warned of danger. Even Ves sensed something profoundly amiss with these cultists, though when he tried casting his spiritual sense at them, he only found them to be average humans. Their spirituality wasn't any stronger than that of a civilian.

A resplendently dressed and armored Major Verle stepped forward. Commander Lydia joined him at his side. While Verle only made due with a luxurious cape, Lydia used another exobeast pelt to add to her stature.

They approached the lead robed figure, whose face was obscured in the dark. The dim lighting throughout the entire interior of the Temple didn't help matters either.

"I am Commander Lydia of Lydia's Swordmaidens. Please allow me to introduce Major Verle of the 6th Flagrant Vandals, 3rd Tarry Division of the Southern Mech Army of the Bright Republic Mech Corps."

"We meet again, Commander Lydia." A horse voice exited the robed emissary's mouth. "You may call me the Seventeenth Altar. As for you,

stranger from a civilized state, on behalf of the Church of Haatumak, we bless you with the radiance of our watching god. Know that in these silent times, the presence of Haatumak will guide you to the light you Brighters so crave."

Ves felt a vague sense of déjà-vu when he heard the so-called Seventeenth Altar speak. Did he know the cultist from somewhere? Had they met before? Or was the cultist messing with his mind with a peculiar speech technique?

"..Charmed." Verle eventually released. He raised his hand in an attempt to shake the Seventeenth Altar's hand, but thought better of it. Obviously his diplomatic training could use some refreshing. "This is not a suitable venue to talk business. Please lead the way."

"Very well. If you will follow us. Do not attempt to deviate from our path. You will die. This is not a warning. This is Haatumak's will."

Two-dozen officers from the Swordmaidens and the Vandals befuddled followed after the emissaries. What struck Ves as he stepped a little closer to the worshippers was the smell emanating out of their bodies.

They reeked like rotting insects and lizard meat gone stale! The atrocious blend of smells seemed to emanate from their very flesh, because there was nothing else the smells could have come from! Though the smell wasn't strong enough to induce physical nausea, none of the guests wanted to stay aboard the Temple any longer than necessary!

The lengthy, rusty and not entirely even corridors of the ship smelled as if it decades of accumulated sweat and other excretions from the cultists had stained the very bulkheads with their brand of smells.

The sounds and noise echoing off the barren corridors and largely empty compartments also added to the pervasive sense of otherness that suffused the Temple of Haatumak.

As a temple, the worshippers hadn't left the bulkheads bare. Random stretches of vague alien script dominated some spaces. At other places, some worshippers had worked the metal bulkheads, treating them as raw material to fashion incomprehensible sculptures of star systems, exobeasts and more alien script.

He could tell that the various depictions carried a profound message. At some of these impromptu works of art and piety, various groups of cultists knelt down and prayed in front of them. They were sometimes joined by pirate guests dressed in similar elaborate armored outfits as the Vandals and the Swordmaidens.

"Haatumak.. I beseech you.." A pirate prayed with a gruff frontier accent. "Bless my next raid.. may the sandmen never find my fleet.. may we plunder much booty.. harvest a rich amount of slaves.. please bless our raiding expedition.."

Ves wanted to slap the head of that praying pirate commander silly. Was Haatumak the god of piracy something?!

"..KhnlfeheN.. Haatumak! 'Ulothenana.. Ken'Haatumak la Kh'tnewAdda.."

If that wasn't bad enough, the robed members of the Church of Haatumak prayed in an entirely alien language.. some even spoke sounds that couldn't be pronounced with a baseline human's voice!

The unsettling, alien voices emanating from their throats disturbed the Vandals and the Swordmaidens even further. Even though the latter group had visited the Temple of Haatumak before, they never got used to the pervasive weirdness that suffused the entire vessel.

It didn't help that the worshippers adhered to the same hygiene and maintenance standards as the rest of the frontier. This meant that visitors encountered sporadic piles of junk and random splotches on the deck along

the way to wherever the Seventeenth Altar was supposed to lead them towards.

Ves also observed a complete lack of cleaning bots along the way. Instead, robes worshippers appeared to be manually cleaning the deck with the most low-tech mops he had ever seen. They consisted of a salvaged alloy bar that could have come from a random shipwreck with a dense mop of artificial fibers stuck at one of the ends.

No wonder the corridor looked so dirty. Wasn't the Church worried about epidemics or something? Ves would rather see the return of cleaning bots despite their propensity to spontaneously commit genocide.

"..humzah.. Haatumak.. K'chREnotendada.. Haatumak.."

Their silent torture finally ended when they reached a large hollow chamber set up as a grand hall of worship. The same incomprehensible sights they encountered in the corridors seemed to dominate the entire hall.

Various statues of star systems, alien script and random exobeasts had been forged out of salvaged alloys. The worshippers who fashioned them together never hid the humble origins of their source materials. The visible diversity in their materials added a sense of triumph from adversity to their impression.

The low mantra of worship in alien language sounded a lot more pervasive in the hollow chamber. The echoes only amplified their ability to prevent any guests from relaxing.

The Seventeenth Altar waved his hand, causing his fellow attendant worshippers to disperse. "Please follow me to the Ritual Pit, guests. We must register your entry to our holy temple to the watchers of our venerable lord."

That sounded reassuring. Still, the fact that the Swordmaidens hadn't lashed out or anything demonstrated that this procedure shouldn't be harmful to them. Hopefully.

The Ritual Pit had been constructed through the deck in the middle of the hall. An empty amphitheater-like construction ringed the depression in the deck.

It looked as if someone incorporated a swimming pool in this chamber, only instead of filling it with water or some other normal fluid, the worshippers instead filled it with blood!

The Vandals tried hard not to show their disgust at the intense coppery smell that suffused the vicinity of the pool. Ves looked at the semi-viscous red liquid and tried to imagine how many humans the Church of Haatumak had bled to gather so much blood.

Flanking the unsettling pool, a pair of horse-sized genetically engineered beasts that resembled hounds from hell stood guard. Ves recognized a strong trace of dogs, but he couldn't identify which alien traits they had been blended with that made them appear so bloodthirsty and intimidating.

Oh, they were bloodthirsty alright.

Literally so as one of the hounds lazily plopped its muzzle close to the surface of the pool and started lapping at the blood as if they were drinking off a dog bowl!

An errant thought in his mind suspected that the Seventeenth Altar deliberately walked them through all of the other weirdness they encountered so far just to prevent them from freaking out at the sight of the massive pool of blood!

Ves felt as if they were being treated like frogs dumped into a pan of water that was slowly being brought to boil!

He wasn't the only one who thought so, as the reflexive motions of some of the Vandals showed they too faced a fight or flight response.

Naturally, nobody reacted in the end. They willingly entered the den of the beast. Turning around halfway would thoroughly offend the Church of Haatumak and may make it difficult for them to exit.

The Seventeenth Altar approached the edge of the pool, rummaged in the pockets of his robes and retrieved what appeared to be a nutrient pack of all things!

"Hmm.. strawberry chicken with authentic Rubarthan tomatoes flavor.. forty-three years old.. Good enough.."

The cultist ripped open the top of the pack before throwing it into the pool, wrapping and all!

The pool of blood started to bubble. Not because it heated up, but because something released a breath from beneath!

Ves and some of the Vandals took an unconscious step back. What kind of eldritch creature did the Seventeenth Altar woke up? Would this monster appreciate being disturbed by one of the most awful foods that humanity had ever invented?

"Arise!" The Seventeenth Altar raised his hands while forming claw-like shapes. "Arise, great envoy of our lord!"

What emerged from the pool of blood wasn't some massive exobeast. Nor did it resemble some kind of inanimate alien object or the like.

No, what actually emerged from the pool was a perfect specimen of a naked human male!

Though only the torso emerged from the surface, the fantastic athleticism of the body along with the naturally handsome contours of the body and face made many women among the Swordmaidens and Vandals stumble.

The only reason why they hadn't become more smitten at the figure was because the gaze of the man looked eerily dead.

Though his body seemed unquestionably functional, there didn't seem to be anything present in the strange man's mind!

"This.. this is a clone!" Someone uttered.

A clone! Of who?! And what purpose did the clone serve?!

Ves figured he was about to find out, because the Seventeenth Altar prostrated before the emerged clone. The cultist muttered some alien words that none of the Swordmaidens or the Vandals understood. Hell, they didn't even know if the half-dead clone registered the words either.

Nonetheless, after blabbering for half a minute, the clone began to react. He was actually functional enough to respond to stimuli! Ves had never heard of any successful instances of clones that were able to do something so simple yet so far out of reach!

Every attempt at cloning a human resulted in a brain-dead sack of flesh! This seemed to be a universal rule, and applied to sentient aliens as well as most complex forms of life!

Yet either the Church of Haatumak had cracked the secret somehow, or the man wasn't a clone at all, and turned out to be a half-grown human who for some reason liked to spend his time submerged in blood!

Nonetheless, Ves didn't have any time to think further, because the clone started to make his move. The blood-soaked man's eyes began to shine.

Chapter 695 TekTak

Not human. The discomfort Ves and the others felt from the figure that emerged from the pool of blood came from the fact that it looked human, but acted anything but like one.

"Witness the glory of Tektak, the Ordained Eyes of Haatumak!" The Seventh Altar shrieked with his horse voice baring at his heavily modified throat. "Bare your soul to him so that he may judge your worthiness in our savior and god!"

Ves had a small hunch. The strange manifestation of Tektak's glowing eyes portended a possible threat to him, yet he didn't know why he felt this way!

What was the purpose of those glowing eyes? He mulled the question in his mind at an accelerated rate, which had the illusion of slowing down his perception of time. The eerie red glowing eyes grew brighter and brighter, but at a pace that gave him a small measure of time to think!

He recalled the recent sights and tried to pin down the reason for the discomfort he had felt ever since he stepped inside the Temple of Haatumak. Why did the ship and her people emanate a faint sense of threat to him, to the point of stimulating his fight or flight response?

The disorientation he suffered from the Temple's various visual, auditory and olfactory cues confused his judgement and made it hard for him to think clearly. The Church of Haatumak deliberately messed with his senses!

He concluded that he couldn't rely on his normal senses at all.

During times like these, he trusted his sixth sense the most. As much as others wanted to deceive his perceptions and mislead him by transmitting confusing signals tailor-made to instill specific detrimental effects, they shouldn't be omnipotent.

These cultists may have been seasoned masters in deceiving his five regular senses, but what did they know about spirituality? Ves tentatively considered himself as an adept of this ethereal, metaphysical field.

He closed his eyes and tried to ignore the stimuli that constantly brushed against his hearing, smell and taste. He disregarded the pool of blood, the

reeking smell of copper or the tangy moist taste in the air and focused his attention on his sixth sense.

One critical observation stood out.

He felt it, stronger and closer than ever. The all-encompassing presence locked within the bones thrummed throughout the entire two-kilometer length of the Temple of Haatumak.

The remnant presence only had a vague presence left, minute in the larger scheme of things. Yet it reminded him of another chimera creation, one that left a profound impression in his memories and still impressed him to this day!

The Kaius, the massive mech made out of the carcass of a hexapod king and salvaged parts of wrecked mechs. The deadly chimera mech had been fashioned by a rather unskilled mech designer, but over the years the mad Dr. Jutland constantly tweaked and refined its biological parts until it became a near-unbeatable machine on Groening IV!

If not for his sabotage, perhaps Captain Kaine's Hunting Platoon would have never been able to contend against this beast!

"Why am I recalling the Kaius of all things?"

He churned his mind as fast as possible, hoping to reach an answer before this clone called Tektak unleashed whatever metaphysical mumbo jumbo it had in store.

"Wait a minute.. They're similar!"

The Kaius and the Temple of Haatumak didn't resemble each other at all at first glance. One was a mech made out of dead, rotting but not quite decayed tissue. The other was a massive ship that consisted largely of salvaged ships and alloy junk. The leviathan skeleton enveloping it only appeared to be cosmetic and symbolic in function than anything else.

Yet.. even though back then, his sixth sense hadn't developed up to its current strength, he swore the Kaius carried a similar air to the leviathan remnant. The dignity of the king among their species, the supreme confidence of an apex predator, the lamentation of their fall, all of these feelings were remarkably faint, but present when many other remnants retained no emotions at all.

What tied Dr. Jutland and these weird cultists together? Why did they share the same propensity for working with exobeast remains?

His eyes widened in realization.

The Five Scrolls Compact!

Dr. Jutland may have been an exiled member of that dangerous cult, but certainly he might not be the only one! The Compact, known to be obsessed with tinkering with genetics in the pursuit of longevity, were probably the most formidable researchers in the field of genetic modification!

The other possibility was that the Church of Haatumak may not be exiles at all, but a legitimate off-shoot of the Compact! As a huge underground organization that could rival the MTA in power and technology, their presence was everywhere. For the Church to be one of their hidden arms allowed the Compact to maintain ties with every independent pirate outfit that sought out their services.

Other clues strengthened his conviction.

The worshippers of Haatumak all wore earthen-colored robes that obscured their bodies. The religious symbols and alien script that ran over their surface and sprang in the air in a miniature light show distracted guests from noticing the inhuman proportions and protrusions from some of the figures underneath the robes. Ves bet their actual appearance diverged enormously from the baseline human form!

If the MTA excelled in understanding machines, then the Five Scrolls Compact were the masters of human biology. Everything Ves witnessed so far about the Church of Haatumak gave him the notion that they were certainly up to weird activities.

While that did not necessarily establish a solid connection between the Church and the Compact, it made a certain amount of sense, and it wasn't as if he figured out a better theory.

What mattered was that the Compact, and by extension the Church, liked to mess with biology and their own bodies. It was one thing to strengthen their bodies in order to increase their ability to fight and survive, which the Swordmaidens had done.

It was another thing entirely to experiment on themselves because they worshipped an alien entity and liked to experiment on themselves and others to further their research or something.

Even though Ves still doubted that the connection between the two organizations actually existed, time was running out. He needed to act on this information now before it was too late!

Tektak's glowing eyes became so bright they resembled a binary pair of red suns. Whatever the clone activated should be activating soon, if it hadn't done so already.

Ves quickly tried to figure out what those glowing eyes were meant to observe, and whether Ves might be at risk. The problem was that he just didn't know too much about the Five Scrolls Compact!

So he turned the question around. What was it about Ves that they might be interested in the most?

The System! From his father's message, the System originally belonged to the Compact! Though Ves had no idea why such a wondrous program was

related to a secret organization that largely dealt with biology rather than machines, he had no cause to doubt his father's words.

Ves breathed a tiny sigh of relief for leaving the comm which held the System behind on Cloudy Curtain. He possessed nothing on his body which tied him to the System which his father had snatched from their grasp.

Then his breath stuttered again because though he left the System behind, he couldn't leave his body behind!

Plenty of stuff might alarm these cultists if this TekTak picked up their presence. His enhanced Spirituality, his extremely weird Jutland organ, regulator organ that had half-merged with his nervous system and the unknown energy cycle undetectable by normal means might all be exposed by this biological scanner.

"No. Not quite."

The gifts he received from Dr. Jutland might still be explained. After all, the CFA had already taken plenty of scans and tissue samples. They even cloned his entire body! So if the Compact had a halfway decent spy network, then they might have already been aware of the hidden curiosities in his body.

The only secret that Ves truly couldn't leak was his Spirituality. Though he didn't know how he initially came to possess it, Ves knew undeniably that his mental strength received a substantial boost after consuming Dr. Jutland's heavenly flower.

So if TekTak possibly looked out for unnaturally strong mentalities, then Ves needed to figure out a way to obscure it as fast as possible.

His panic had reached a peak until he suddenly figured out a solution.

It was simple! Just think about nothing at all!

Everything he had seen so far had been designed to attract his attention! From the dirty corridors to the massive pool of blood and the weird clone with glowing eyes, they not only confused and disoriented their guests, but they also put them in a flighty condition where their minds became razor-focused on a couple of strong thoughts and urges.

The Church might have intended to prod him into concentrating his mind!

This might be because his Spirituality became a sharp and solid entity when Ves concentrated his mind on a single topic. However, the moment he became scatterbrained, all of that solid mass dispersed into intangible mist.

While this mist still carried a lot of energy compared to what laid inside the mind of a baseline human, it was essentially directionless. With particles of thought energy randomly flitting up and down, back and forth, left and right, the net effect was that his Spirituality didn't exert any pressure on anything.

In essence, his Spirituality became just as hard to detect as any other person's mental energy!

He closed his eyes, ostensibly to avoid the glow of TekTak's blindingly bright red eyes, and mentally jarred his mind into a confusing mess.

It sounded complicated, but Ves was actually extremely good at throwing his mind in a state of disarray. Sometimes, he even suspected that this might even be his natural state of mind.

A few more seconds passed as the brightness continued to increase in luminosity to the point of penetrating past his eyelids. That threatened to distract Ves into focusing his thoughts on the strange entity called TekTak, but he forcibly punched his mentality once again, causing it to break apart into formless mist.

He did it just in time, because an even brighter flash washed over the Vandals and the Swordmaidens! Along with the flash that pricked his eyes even after

keeping his eyes pressed shut, his sixth sense also felt a faint wave of formless energy brushing through his body!

Ves worked harder than ever before to keep his mind in a mindless state, which sounded harder than it actually appeared to be. His chaotic mind hosted hundreds of thoughts at a time, tugging his spirituality in so many different directions that it didn't react or hinder the energy wave at all!

The energy wave also passed through his organs and energy cycle like they didn't exist, so Ves figured it was purely geared towards detecting entities that possessed unusual spiritualities.

Perhaps the Church didn't even employ an entity like TekTak to detect anomalies like Ves. The only other humans that might have possibly reacted to the energy wave were high-ranking mech pilots and mech designers.

That should have been TekTak's main purpose now that he thought about it! Someone like Ves may have never been the target at all! Yet if Ves hadn't scatterbrained his own mind, he might have been mistaken as one of them by the worshippers of Haatumak, which could have led to all kinds of awful consequences.

As the wave finally passed and light finally dimmed, everything turned back to normal. The crisis had passed, and neither the Seventeenth Altar or TekTak showed any signs of detecting something unusual among them. While that didn't rule out that they were merely hiding their reactions, Ves figured that this was probably not the case.

TekTak gazed in the direction of the Swordmaidens and Vandals with unblinking eyes as his upper body slowly began to submerge into the pool of water.

The process looked eerie, as the unmoving and unblinking TekTak resembled a lifeless statue that had been thrown into a lake.

The Seventeenth Altar stepped into view, his robe blocking the view of the sinking clone. "The Ordained Eyes of Haatumak is pleased with what they have seen. All of you are qualified to remain aboard our Temple if you are in need of asylum or enlightenment in our ways. If not, I shall bring you to our Coinlord with whom you may arrange a transaction."

"We'd like to pick the latter, please." Major Verle said, his voice not entirely stable. "Time is short, and we are expected elsewhere. We would appreciate it if we can expedite our meeting with the Coinlord."

"If that is what you wish, Brighter."

Chapter 696 Closed Ranks

Ves maintained a wary attitude throughout his stay aboard the Temple of Haatumak. Even after the Seventeenth Altar led them away from the eerie pool of blood and the human-like entity that resided within, he still remained a little too jumpy for his own good.

Fortunately, his suit of armor and the cape that enveloped half his form helped a lot to hide the nervousness in his body language. As for his face, he consciously focused on keeping it as immobile as possible.

Of course, concentrating his mind on anything risked getting picked up by whatever detection methods the worshippers of Haatumak installed throughout the interior of the vessel.

Still, from the elaborate and deliberate showmanship around the entity known as TekTak, Ves figured that it wouldn't be easy to replicate the same feat. The energy wave that emanated out of TekTak also spread out in an expanding sphere, meaning that if physics didn't completely screw up, the expanding field should have been subject to the inverse-square law.

In simple terms, the energy wave should have lost enough power that by the time the delegations exited the central chamber, it should have been so dispersed it wouldn't be able to do anything about his mentality at all.

So Ves should by all rights relax.

He couldn't. Not when the Seventeenth Altar led the Swordmaidens and the Vandals deeper into the bowels of a ship that was possibly related to the dreaded Five Scrolls Compact.

Considering that the Compact may very well be his archenemy, Ves couldn't afford to let down his guard.

As they walked through a number of corridors featuring the same kind of scenery as before, they finally emerged in a medium-sized compartment that looked cleaner than the rest of the ship. At least here the cultists actually made a decent attempt at matching the efficiency of cleaning bots.

Ves blinked as they met yet another robed fellow sitting at a desk in the center of the largely empty compartment.

"Coinlord, the delegation from Lydia's Swordmaidens and the Flagrant Vandals wishes to discuss.. business with us."

The man called the Coinlord extended a gnarled finger from his voluminous sleeves. "Understood. Begone now."

With that brief exchange of words, the Seventeenth Altar silently stepped outside the compartment, upon which the hatch slid shut.

"I would invite you to take a seat, outsiders, but I am afraid this compartment is lacking amenities."

"We can stand." Major Verle replied in a curt tone. Denying them seats during a business negotiation was a petty move, but the cultists probably didn't care.

"We'd like to make a deal."

"Very well. Step closer. I shall bring up the suggested contract so we may discuss the finer points."

Compared to the Seventeenth Altar and the other robed figures, the Coinlord sounded a lot more normal than the others. It probably came with the job if he was responsible for taking care of the business side of running the Church of Haatumak.

Commander Lydia, Major Verle and the Coinlord all huddled around and started to negotiate. Ves idly listened in on the conversation. Besides handing over a substantial but not too painful sum of K-coins, the Coinlord also demanded some inexplicable requests the Vandals and the Swordmaidens were obligated to fulfill.

Many of these requests fell in the range of sending a number of Vandals to pray to Haatumak for three days in a row aboard the Temple.

Another request entailed sending another delegation to conduct a sacrifice to Haatumak. The cultists demanded a human sacrifice, the more the better. This request caused Major Verle and the Vandals to balk, but Commander Lydia calmly stepped in at that point.

"The Swordmaidens will provide the sacrifices. Just like before."

The Coinlord nodded underneath his robes. "Very well. Be aware that your sacrifices do not quite meet our requirements. If you wish to satisfy our lord, you must bring a greater number than you brought before."

"We shall bring half as much on top of the normal quota."

"Acceptable, if only just. I suggest you bring livelier sacrifices next time."

None of the Vandals officers present were stupid. They realized that the Swordmaidens have very well condemned some of their own slaves to death.

Commander Lydia bartered away their lives like trading away chickens at a market stall.

Ves almost scooted away from the Swordmaidens. The brief exchange highlighted the fact that while the Swordmaidens may seem friendly to the Vandals, their pirate heritage still ran through their genes. They stuck to morality only when it suited them, and disregarded it whenever it became a hindrance.

As the horse-trading dragged on, his mind began to wander off a little. The presence of Ves, Mayra and the others seemed superfluous. It appeared they only accompanied their mech commanders in order to make them look more impressive. So far, they played no role in the negotiations.

His eyes rolled around the empty compartment and wondered why the Temple of Haatumak built such a huge space only to place a single desk and chair in the very center. The bulkheads were oddly bare. Besides some subtle alien script sprinkled here and there, the entire compartment looked as barren as an empty cargo hold.

Did the Church of Haatumek spend all those resources to build a massive and impressive looking ship, only to scratch their heads when they had to put all of that internal volume to use?

Ves saw nothing in the compartment. His nose and ears sensed nothing either. It was completely empty and devoid of any furnishings, markings or anything else.

The emptiness disturbed him and nagged at him. He wasn't the only one who felt that way, as many of the Swordmaidens and Vandals fidgeted as they stood at attention behind their leaders.

Something was giving him the creeps again. The closed compartment had cut him off from the sounds of the praying worshippers, the sight of strange idols

carved out of the bulkheads and the insectoid smell emanating from the bodies of the robed figures.

He should have been comforted by the lack of disturbing stimuli. Instead, their absence had the eerie effect of making him jump at shadows that didn't exist!

"The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown." He muttered silently to himself. He repeated these words because they felt apt to this situation.

This notion predicated on the premise that a threat likely existed, and may be closer than he thought!

He remembered earlier with TekTak that the Church of Haatumak may not be so oblivious to spirituality than the rest of humanity. If the Five Scrolls Compact had already scratched the surface of the secrets behind the spirituality phenomenon, then it may not be farfetched to assume the Church touched upon the same secrets!

On an impulse, Ves exerted his Spirituality and sent out a tiny pulse in imitation of TekTak's move. A ripple emanated from his mind in a small sphere, spreading far enough to cover the entire chamber before dissipating.

He frowned a bit.

His own pulse appeared to have encountered a minute amount of resistance, yet there shouldn't anything in the compartment but air!

He repeated the pulse, and encountered the same kind of airy sensation that he felt whenever he passed over his Spirituality through a human body.

It made him feel a bit suspicious. What was up with the Coinlord and his strangely wide but empty compartment?

Though he carefully pulsed a few more times, varying the parameters of the energy waves his mind emitted, he couldn't figure out anything else. It was as

if something was right in front of him, but he was too blind to spot its presence!

Only his sixth sense seemed sensitive enough to detect something amiss, but it couldn't replace his conventional human senses.

"Ah!"

An inspired idea flitted across his mind. If his senses lacked the sensitivity to spot the hidden presence, then why not try to leverage the strength of his Spirituality to enhance its capabilities?

It sounded like a risky idea. He did not wish to mess up his eyesight at this crucial moment. Yet if he simply stood still and pass the time in silence, then decision to do nothing would continue to haunt him for a long time.

He simply couldn't resist the temptation of knowing.

Besides, if he popped his own eyes for some reason, he could simply let the doctors of the Vandals clone a new pair of eyes to replace his old ones.

He carefully released a tendril of spiritual energy from the center of his brains. Slowly and steadily, they extended towards his left eyeball, leaving his right one unaided for the moment. There was no reason to employ both of his eyes at once for this impromptu experiment.

Nothing seemed to happen as the invisible and intangible tendril of energy ran through his left eye. The energy tendril and eyeball existed in two completely different realms. There didn't appear to be any overlap for the energy tendril to latch on.

Ves needed to find a way to interact. He couldn't figure out any other way than concentrating his mind to focus on the idea of the energy tendril enhancing his eyesight.

Surprisingly, it happened easier than he thought. The energy tendril exhibited some kind of rudimentary intelligence as it abruptly enveloped his eyeball and saturated specific tissue with an abundance of its energy.

Was it working?

He blinked.

Then his eyesight changed.

The vision coming from his left eye continued to show a large and empty compartment. Besides the armored and caped forms of the Vandals and Swordmaidens, the only other objects that occupied it was the Coinlord and his desk and chair.

The vision from his left eye showed a very different sight. Though the images from his left eye became a little blurred, he still perceived a massive difference from what his other eye transmitted back to his brains!

His enhanced sight plainly told him that the compartment was packed with dark-robed cultists!

Perhaps a hundred cultists stood side-by-side, filling up every available space and leaving virtually no free space between their bodies!

The cultists stood next to the bulkheads, next to the Coinlord and his desk, next to Commander Lydia and Major Verle, and more alarmly right in front of Ves and the other members of the delegation!

Frighteningly enough, their bodies and their dark hooded faces faced the nearest visible entity, resembling the behavior of metal files when thrown at a magnet. Those closest to the Coinlord stared at the worshipper in charge of business transaction, while the invisible entities that stood only a finger's width apart from Ves stared directly in his face!

He suppressed every possible reaction he could make! He even pressed an internal button in his suit of armor to lock it up entirely so that he could focus on keeping his expression and eye movements as neutral as possible.

He couldn't let the dark cultists know he detected their presence!

His concentration proved to be a great help in this endeavor. He reacted quickly enough to halt his facial twitches before they could fully convey his shock of recognition.

Ves especially fought back his impulse to stare directly in the eyes of the cultist whose face was only five or so centimeters away from his own!

What was going on?! How could so many cultists sneak inside this compartment and remain invisible and undetectable? Despite facing a dark-hooded cultist right in front of his face, Ves did not sense that cultist's breath at all!

Were the cultists even physically present in this compartment? If Ves were to stretch his arm forward, would he bump into their bodies or go right through them as if they existed in another plane?

A small part of his mind doubted whether his left eye wasn't making things up. Surely there couldn't be so many invisible cultists in the compartment? Neither his human senses nor the sensors of his combat armor detected anything amiss! Therefore, Ves started to doubt whether the presence had manifested in the compartment in a physical form.

On an impulse, Ves temporarily unlocked his armor suit and abruptly raised his arm as if to stretch it out of boredom.

He expected his arm to go right through the cultist standing in front of him. He did not expect the cultist to quickly move backwards, avoiding the armored limb entirely.

The robed figure's movement had a ripple effect on his fellow cultists. Every invisible worshipper next to him moved backwards to provide more space, causing the invisible figures behind them to make way as well.

A simple gesture from Ves caused almost half of the cultists to rear back!

Ves seriously became distressed. Were these cultists physically present in this compartment? How could that be!

Chapter 697 Living Altar

Ignorance was bliss.

Ves should have never messed with his Spirituality. Look where that got him. He detected an invisible mob of robed worshippers that pretty much filled up the entire compartment, but couldn't act on the information!

If he spoke out now and warned his comrades, who would believe him? He'd only be tipping off the worshippers of Haatumak, thereby drawing unnecessary attention from them. Nothing good would come from revealing their presence when they didn't appear to be malicious!

From what he could tell, while the invisible figures weren't doing anything other than to stare creepily at the nearest humans, he still felt as if their presence wasn't simple.

Nobody would surround a bunch of people with invisible and completely undetectable cultists for the fun of it!

He eventually decided to pull back his curiosity and deactivate his newly enhanced sight. The compartment appeared blessedly empty and void of any creepy cultists.

As the negotiations began to wind down, Ves tried and failed to come up for a reason why the Church of Haatumak sent so many invisible cultists in this compartment. He simply couldn't explain their behavior at all, from their motivations to how they accomplished this strange feat.

Even among the frontier, their methods were too extreme!

Therefore, Ves concluded that guessing anything about them was an exercise in futility. He'd be driven mad before he could derive any meaning from their actions.

He'd rather explore his new discovery instead.

Spirituality seemed more wondrous and versatile than he thought. He already found out that they were the key to the advancement of mech pilots and possibly mech designers as well. Back home, Lucky managed to learn and retain the ability to turn his mechanical cat-like body intangible, a trick that Ves had never mastered to his regret.

Ves assumed his Spirituality only excelled at creating imaginary entities, but it turned out to be more versatile than he thought.

Did aptitude play a role? Were certain people or entities inclined towards certain applications of spiritual energy than other methods? Or could Ves utilize any possible use as long as he nailed down the correct method?

The difference was profound. If the latter leaned towards the truth, then Ves would someday be capable of performing feats that resembled magic by employing nothing but his mind!

As Ves mulled over this issue, the negotiation finally ended. Both Commander Lydia and Major Verle appeared content with the deal they made with the Coinlord. After making a lot of commitments to participate in various strange rituals, the Church of Haatumak would only charge a modest fee to 'bless' each of their starships.

This was what they came for. As they exited the strangely empty compartment, the two leaders addressed their subordinates.

"We shall be remaining aboard the Temple of Haatumak for three more days." Verle began. "Each of you shall follow a different attendant, who will guide you to different parts of their vessel in order to take part in their worship and other rituals."

The Swordmaidens already knew what was in store, but some of the Vandals groaned.

"I do not expect you to convert to their religion! In fact, it would be better if you'd not! Just remember your instructions. Remain polite and respectful, but don't get hoodwinked! We are both Vandals and Brighters! Remember your heritage, and I'm confident you won't go astray!"

Commander Lydia approached the Vandals. "My Swordmaidens and I have been through their mumbo-jumbo before. The ceremonies the worshippers of Haatumak conduct are unsettling, but harmless. The only way they can harm you is if your conviction is too weak, something which you Vandals shouldn't be too concerned about. Have you seen the pirates along the way?"

They nodded. They came across many random pirates who joined the dark-robed cultists into worshipping some idol or alien script.

"They're the ones who forgot themselves. They abandoned their ship, captain and comrades to become a nameless devotee to Haatumak." She spoke grimly. "If you fall into their trap, don't expect us to rescue you. One of the agreements we made with the Church of Haatumak is that once you become a believer, you are no longer part of our crew."

The Vandals acknowledged the warning but didn't consider themselves to be at risk. Compared to the pathetic, weak-willed pirates that the Church hoodwinked into joining their side, the Vandals were made of sterner stuff.

A few minutes later, a number of lighter robed figures arrived behind the heels of the Seventeenth Altar. The man bowed before the delegation and gestured at the cultists he brought.

"Our acolytes will accompany each of your delegates to their intended destinations. Rest assured that we will take care of your men and women. They will be in good hands."

Even if the guests doubted the goodwill of the Church, they had no choice but to play along.

The slightly hunched and short figure that approached Ves turned out to be an old lady of some sorts. The crone-like figure hid her face underneath the hood of her robes, but her voice as well as her contours betrayed enough to figure out a few clues.

"Head designer Larkinson. I am Acolyte Villis. Your presence is requested at our mech workshop. Follow."

The Vandals and Swordmaidens split up. As a mech designer, Ves figured that the Church wanted to employ rituals related to mechs when it came to him and Mayra. However, another acolyte led Mayra towards a different section of the ship, so it seemed he wouldn't be able to lean on her experience this time.

Acolyte Villis led Ves to a series of corridors and elevators that brought him deeper into the lower decks of the Temple of Haatumak. Along the way, he encountered fewer cultists and worshippers, but the number of altars and symbols painted on the bulkheads never receded.

Along the silent journey, Ves dared not to stimulate his Spirituality. He didn't need to, because his instincts and his passive senses warned him that the invisible watchers never left his presence. He could guess that their presence

might have drastically been reduced, but he never felt truly alone with Acolyte Villis.

"Acolyte?"

"Yes, head designer?"

"Are you permitted to answer some questions?"

The robed acolyte shrugged. Ves took that to mean that she had never been forbidden to do so, but that few guests actually took the initiative to do so.

Considering how creepy the interior of the Temple appeared and how strangely the worshippers behaved, Ves didn't blame the others from keeping their mouths shut.

Yet while Ves sensed plenty of latent threats from his surroundings, the worshippers never revealed any signs of actual malice. As long as he stayed under their radar, the robed figures didn't place a lot of emphasis on him. They had no reason to suspect he was anything special.

"Can you tell me about Haatumak? What kind of god is he?"

The acolyte halted in her footsteps. The old crone turned around until her obscured hooded face glanced at Ves. For some reason, he still wasn't able to make out any of her facial features.

The lighting that illuminated the corridors might be rather dim, but it shouldn't have been able to blacken the insides of the hoods completely!

More strange magics was afoot.

"Haatumak.. you'd do well not to pry into matters you are not yet worthy to know."

It seems as if they really prize the secrecy surrounding their religion. Ves didn't know whether they did it for show or if they really believed in the entity

they called by that name. He half-believed that all of the theatrics he had witnessed so far were made-up rituals meant to cover up the possibility that they acted as an arm of the Five Scrolls Compact.

He still hadn't obtained any solid proof that the Compact had a hand in the Church, he summed up his courage and kept asking probing questions.

Since asking about Haatumak directly touched upon a taboo, Ves took on a different tack. "Who is the Seventeenth Altar? Why is he called by that title?"

Apparently, the acolyte faced much less restrictions when it came to this topic. She answered calmly but readily.

"The Seventeenth Altar is one of the ninety-nine Living Altars in human flesh. They are one of the most devoted servants of our Church, dedicating both their bodies and their fate to our lord. As the seventeenth-ranked Altar, the man is closer to our lord than many other believers. He is one of the leading shepherds of the acolytes."

"So are they the mid-ranked priests of your Church?"

"I have heard them described in that fashion." The crone responded as they both resumed their journey towards the Temple's mech workshop. "To be more accurate, they are not quite priests. They have taken a step beyond what even the High Priest has taken in our devotion towards our lord. They have offered up their very flesh and bones to be turned into a Living Altar upon which others may offer their sacrifices! You cannot fathom the immensity of such a choice to us!"

Ves blinked a few times. He tried to parse the meaning behind her words. For some reason, a worshipper who went beyond a priest were called Living Altars. The main significance behind this transformation appeared to be to facilitate the rituals the Church regularly cooked up.

What was an altar?

He imagined a table or solid raised surface, upon which random religious props were scattered over its surface. It served as a convenient surface to place down a bowl of holy water or a ritual dagger. They also served as a sacred area upon which various solemn rituals may be conducted by priests.

So what did a Living Altar do?

The image of the table replaced itself with an ugly, old man who subjected his body with an abundance of genetic modification. The so-called Living Altar stood at the spot of the previous altar and bent down backwards until his arms supported his arching body beneath his head.

The Living Altar's rough, uneven stomach served as a makeshift surface this time!

Ves quickly shook his head. Such a sight was stupid. The literal meaning of Living Altar simply made no sense.

Suddenly, a disconcerting possibility sprang within his mind. "Say, what kind of rituals do Living Altars partake in?"

The old crone chuckled in a disturbing cackle that sounded like a murder of crows found a carcass to feast upon. "You will regret asking me that question. It is no secret of ours what Living Altars are responsible for. The Seventeenth Altar will be present at the ritual of sacrifice. When your Swordmaiden allies bring their slaves aboard the Temple, do you believe we are content with slitting their throats and let their blood spill on the deck? Haatumak is the watcher, but he also grows hungry!"

"Then.. the Living Altars.."

"You do not need to stammer your words, head designer. At the crucial time, the Living Altars become hosts to Haatumak's Hunger. As the temporary embodiment of a single aspect of our lord, they shall feast upon the flesh that is offered up to us! Only through their assistance will we sate the appetite of

our lord! It is a transcendent ritual that acolytes are lucky to attend! Even I only witnessed less than a dozen sacrifices myself."

Ves grunted but did not speak up any longer. He still needed to process the inhuman practices that Acolyte Willis revealed.

The Living Altars were cannibals! They brazenly disregarded the fundamental rule in human society that human life deserved to be treated with dignity!

This MTA and CFA-enforced rule would usually be mentioned in cases where aliens or unscrupulous people enslaved defenseless humans.

However, eating them was worse! It was bad enough that plenty of alien races developed a palate for human flesh. For humans to practice cannibalism was simply a step too far!

Any human degenerate enough to eat the flesh of their own race was no longer be considered as humans themselves!

Chapter 698 The Soulless Pries

The revelation that certain members of the Church of Haatumak developed a penchant for cannibalism barely affected his mood. He had yet to shrug off his shock from other matters related to this cult!

The sooner he got off the Temple of Haatumak, the sooner he'd be spared her horrors!

When Acolyte Villis finally led him to one of the mech workshops of the Temple, Ves sighed in relief at the lack of weirdness.

The tall and wide compartment that encompassed the mech workshop carried a different air from the rest of the ship. It lacked the idols and candles and dim lighting that profoundly disturbed Ves as he walked through the claustrophobic corridors.

Instead, the mech workshop resembled any other mech workshop he'd seen in the larger combat carriers and fleet carriers. With wide-open spaces, various assembly bays upon which to assemble and disassemble mechs with ease, tightly-organized tool storage spaces and a bevy of normal-looking mech technicians wearing shorter and thinner robes that didn't hinder their movements, the entire workshop seemed to run on logic rather than belief.

Besides the errant symbols painted against the bulkheads, the workshop lacked any other overt religious presence!

"Hmph." He unconsciously grunted in approval. Even if the Church of Haatumak believed their god looked upon them with favor, their beliefs wouldn't be able to save their bacon when they encountered a hostile force.

The cultists likely couldn't pray the attackers away with their rituals alone!

The only way to defend themselves against a hostile mech force was to deploy their own mechs. And while mechs came in all shapes and sizes, if the fanatics interfered too much with the maintenance and operation of their mechs, they would probably be dragging down their own defense.

That must have led to the current situation where the most zealous among the worshippers of Haatumak had refrained from extending too many tentacles to the mech workshop.

It demonstrated that the Church of Haatumak could be pragmatic when it came to matters related to their survival.

The acolyte calmly shuffled deeper into the workshop. The passing of the pair elicited no attention from the mech technicians that stoically performed their duties in silence.

The lack of chatter disturbed Ves a bit. He knew mech technicians. They always chatted about inane topics such as the booze they were brewing out of

nutrient packs or how much they looked forward to fleecing their comrades in the next card game.

The pair entered a semi-open enclosure that hosted a number of terminals. Various pirates in different sets of outfits silently worked on various designs behind the terminals.

Ves took in their work in a single glance. Each of them were mech designers, and each of them struggled to work with the designs presented before them. This was no wonder, as the mech designers were largely at the Novice level while the designs seemed to have come from the hand of a Journeyman.

Acolyte Villis approached the only figure sitting behind a control panel on a raised dais. Annoyingly, the figure completely hid their form beneath a thick black robe.

"Acolyte Villis." An electronically distorted voice of an old man emerged from the shadows of the hood. "Have you come to bring the latest fool?"

"This is Head Designer Ves Larkinson of the Flagrant Vandals. Mr. Larkinson, this is the Soulless Priest. He is the ranking mech designer aboard our Temple."

Ves bowed his head in respect. "Soulless Priest."

"You may address me as Soulless."

"Very well."

The two stared at each other and took each other's measure.

Ves didn't know what Soulless made of his appearance. He himself tried to peer through the shadows hiding the face of this mech designer who aligned himself with a bunch of crazies that harbored cannibals.

He picked up a few observations. For one, the Soulless Priest's contours suggested that he'd been a bit more restrained when it came to genetically

modifying his body. The Soulless distinctly lacked a hulking body shape or some protruding third limb that some of the more disturbing worshippers exhibited.

Aside from that, he cared more about judging the design ability of the Soulless. Ves minutely opened up his sixth sense and tried to sample the man's aura.

He did not pick up much. For whatever reason, the Soulless did a decent job at suppressing his design philosophy, allowing very little of it to leak out.

Still, what little Ves succeeded in capturing confirmed that the Soulless was very likely the aquatic-based mech designer who produced the designs for the Gun Whale, Snapper Dolphin and the Strangler Squids.

The Soulless also exhibited the strength and purity of a Senior Mech Designer, though to a weaker degree than Professor Velten and the Skull Architect. In terms of design chops, the Soulless had barely taken a few steps out of the beaten path while the other two had already progressed so far into the fog that they couldn't even retrace their steps back.

Still, compared to Ves, a Senior was still a Senior. The strength gradation between different Seniors shouldn't concern him at all at this point in his career.

The Soulless nodded again after he finished staring at Ves. The robed mech designer turned his chair and directed his attention back to his control panel, which projected multiple designs at once.

"Acolyte Villis."

"I am at your disposal, Soulless One."

"How many days?"

"Mr. Larkinson is assigned to remain under your direction for a duration of three days."

"Sufficient."

The Soulless one stretched out a sleeve and flicked it towards the old crone. A projection from his console fell into her comm.

"Let Mr. Larkinson take charge of Acolyte Gien Nollet's mech for his upcoming Redemption Duel. I recall it is due to start in two days, so he should best be on his way."

"Understood, sir."

After a small farewell ritual, the acolyte led Ves away from the enclosure and led him towards an assembly bay at the far corner of the workshop compartment.

"Mr. Larkinson. Your task is a pressing one."

He had already gathered that. "As long as it has to do with mechs, I won't shy away from the challenge."

Ves feared the worshippers of Haatumak would demand something crazy from Ves, such as taking a bite out of a recent sacrifice or something. Ves had already heard some examples of the antics the sadistic cultists like to foist upon their guests. It was as if they derived pleasure in the mental suffering of others.

He wasn't sure what his decision would be when faced with the option to partake in human flesh.

If he refused, he risked ruining the deal between the Church of Haatumak and the Flagrant Vandals. If he played along, he'd be breaking what was arguably the second-worst taboo of human society!

In comparison, mechs were safe. Mechs were machines. How could the worshippers of Haatumak possibly screw with mechs?

He was about to find out.

"We have arrived." The crone spoke.

They arrived in front of what appeared to be a salvaged humanoid mech. Ves analyzed the frame of the mech and recognized the characteristic shape of a spaceborn medium lancer mech.

The acolyte emitted a warbling call that caused the handful of mech technicians to put down their tools and form up in front of her. Only one figure took their time to come forth.

"Acolyte Gien!" The crone lost her patience. "Come forward right this instant! Your new mech designer has finally arrived!"

The figure that shambled in front of them wore a half-torn brown robe splotted with crusted blood. The piloting suit the acolyte wore underneath looked as if it had experienced better days, though at least it didn't exhibit any tears or rents that broke its ability to protect its wearer from vacuum.

The most striking feature of Acolyte Gien was that he was the first robed cultist that Ves had met who pulled back their hood! Ves half-expected to see a half-alien monstrosity, but Gien looked disappointingly human.

"Who might you be?" The male acolyte asked rudely.

"My name is Ves Larkinson. I am an Apprentice Mech Designer. From what I understood, I'm to be responsible for your mech for this so-called Redemption Duel."

The acolyte and mech pilot frowned at Ves. "You? A heathen unbeliever is to be assigned to prepare my battle steed? Haatumak preserve my soul!"

Acolyte Gien immediately stomped away without hearing another word from Ves. The mech pilot's abrupt departure stunned Ves into paralysis.

"What was that about?" He eventually uttered to his guide.

"Acolyte Gien has violated his oaths and committed a terrible crime. He is sentenced to death. In two days, he will die."

Ves shouldn't be surprised he ended up in another screwed-up situation.

"What did he do, if I may ask?"

The crone shook her gnarled head underneath the hood of her darker robe.

"Acolyte Gien is a new convert. He has never shown much promise, but performed his duties diligently, until he didn't. He has been caught in the midst of passing off restricted information to a spy."

"If he's guilty of treason, why don't you execute him and be done with the matter?"

"It is a waste to execute an otherwise pious acolyte of ours. Rather than end his life quickly, we prefer for him to redeem himself in the eyes of our lord. The Redemption Duel is exactly that, a mech duel that serves as his one and only chance to earn a second chance to live."

All of this sounded rather convoluted and counterproductive to Ves, but he wasn't exactly in a position to criticize the customs of the Church.

"Is it a duel to the death? Where will the duel take place? Who will be his opponent?"

The crone calmly answered his questions one by one. "The duel will only end if at least one life perishes. The duel shall take place in open space a short distance away from the Temple of Haatumak. His opponent will be another acolyte who violated their oaths."

Ves understood what was going on now. The Church evidently harbored at least two misbehaving mech pilots. The priests could have chopped up their heads in a random sacrifice and have the Living Altars scoop up their brains like ice cream, but evidently they were short on entertainment or something.

Still, it sounded a bit too simple for the cultists to leave it at that. There must be a caveat to this duel.

"I have a feeling this duel isn't so simple as it sounds. What's the catch?" He asked.

The old crone cackled, causing her dark robe to ripple. "The Redemption Duel is no ordinary mech duel. It is a test where the mech pilots must overcome the torture from their own mechs in order to maintain control over them! If their will and tolerance falls short of Haatumak's expectation, then their only fate is death!"

..What?

"What does this 'torture' entail?"

"The technical details escape me, but I am told that the Soulless One has prepared special cockpits to the fallen acolytes. Piloting from one of the modified cockpits is said to be as painful as driving a dozen nails into your skull! Many times, the mental anguish has proven too much to the violators, and their consciousness has shattered entirely, leaving their bodies alive but their souls in pieces!"

Ves tried to remain calm. "I'm to design a mech that is expressly meant to hurt its own mech pilot?"

"Correct." The crone teased out. Ves could practically hear the smirk she must be harboring inside the shadowy void of her hood. "The mech you are responsible for readying for the duel is to be a torture machine first, and a

fighting machine second. The mech pilot must suffer for the Redemption Duel to receive Haatumak's blessings!"

The horror of what the Church expected of Ves started to creep up on him. A mech designer always wished the best for their mech pilots. Even the more neglectful designers didn't wish their mech pilots ill!

To be working on a mech that was expressly meant to make their pilot suffer as much as possible went directly against the mech designer's creed!

Chapter 699 Dark Incentive

Ethics played a significant role in the rules and regulations set up by the Mech Trade Association. Born from the embers of the Age of Conquest, the MTA along with the CFA attempted to impose order on the loose rules against genocide, reckless human experimentation and other crimes against humanity.

From the ground up, the MTA envisioned mechs as a more restrained weapon of war that served the interests of the people instead of the opposite.

Mechs had to be proportional, selective and above all else avoid any possible harm to their own wielders.

The emerging class of potentates enjoyed an elevated status in society. As current and potential mech pilots, each of them were precious and deserved to be treated with reverence.

As for the mech designers that sprung up to accommodate the demands of the mech pilots, their most fundamental goal was to help the pilots fight better. In the overwhelming majority of cases, the interests of the mech designer largely overlapped with the interests of the mech pilots.

They both wanted their mechs to be the best!

Right now, the Soulless Priest demanded the opposite from Ves. If he understood his assignment correctly, then he was expected to work on a torture device in the form of a mech!

"Do you realize the significance of what is being asked of me?"

"We do." The crone replied in an amusing tone, as if lives weren't at stake here. "You are expected to comply. We care nothing for the strictures of the MTA in this region of space. Only the will of Haatumak reigns supreme in this Temple!"

Crazies! Obviously, the fanatics like to make light of the gravity of the situation.

"What are the exact parameters of my assignment?"

Acolyte Villis silently transferred a bunch of virtual documents to his comm. They outlined various demands and restrictions that diverged substantially from what was expected of a normal mech.

The Soulless Priest bestowed the salvaged lancer mech before him with the name of Evaporating Spear. It had been picked up from some abandoned debris field in space a couple of months ago, but hadn't been worked on until a few weeks ago, when it had been assigned to serve as Acolyte Gien's Redemption mech.

A mech designer before Ves made a lot of progress in restoring the Evaporating Spear. However, various parts still needed to be refurbished or tweaked before the mech regained

Ves did not have much time or resources at his disposal. He had access to an internal scrapheap where the Temple of Haatumak stored the loose salvage they picked up over the years. Many of those rusted wrecks and parts were in awful condition.

That was already bad enough, but the restrictions he faced were arguably worse. The mech the Soulless Priest expected from him needed to be battle worthy enough to battle out a duel in space. However, Ves had to do so while working with the special cockpit with the modified neural interface!

As someone who received a few tutoring lessons on neural interfaces, he understood enough of the technical details to know what a travesty the Soulless Priest had produced!

The tampering done to the neural interface looked like a nightmare to Ves. The depraved Senior manipulated the connections that moderated the flow of data between the mech pilot and the mech and damaged the filters that were supposed to block unwanted noise from polluting the channels.

Basically, it was as if the Soulless Priest broke the processing plant that prevent polluted water from flowing into the pipes conveying clean water to various households. The various acts of tampering had systematically disabled enough filters that raw sewage began to leak out into the flow of clean water!

Deviously, the polluted signals channeled by the neural interface wouldn't kill a mech pilot instantly. Instead, they'd overload their brains while heating it up to dangerous levels. Simultaneously, the noisy signals wracked with junk data and other nonsense would make it harder for Acolyte Gien to maintain effective control over the Evaporating Spear!

In fact, at its current state, the Evaporating Spear was basically uncontrollable! It would be as if a promising mech pilot with a B-grade genetic aptitude devolved into a near-cripple with a pathetic E-grade genetic aptitude!

"The increased difficulty in piloting the Evaporating Spear has effectively reached a three-strep drop from the mech pilot's original genetic aptitude!"

Ves could still work with a mech pilot with an E-grade aptitude, but the problem was that according to the documents he received, Acolyte Gien only possessed a C-grade aptitude!

"From C to D is one step. From D to E is another step. E to F is the third step. It only takes three steps to go from average to disaster!"

What was the significance of an F-grade genetic aptitude? Ves possessed the exact same grade! In fact, up to 96.5 percent of every human in the galaxy shared this aptitude!

"Damn it, how can this Soulless Priest foist me upon a mech which effectively turns its intended pilot into a norm?!"

"Remember, Mr. Larkinson, you are not allowed to touch the cockpit at all." the old acolyte reminded him from the side. She had been observing Ves all this while as he started to take in the immensity of this assignment. "While the Soulless One does not demand the Evaporating Priests to win the upcoming Redemption Duel, it must exhibit a worthy struggle! Haatumak will not be pleased if the Evaporating Spear is defeated within seconds because Acolyte Gien failed to move his mech!"

He groaned. Ves wanted to cry out that this assignment was impossible, yet he held back his protests. The Soulless Priest knew what he was doing. Ves wouldn't be able to change his mind on this matter.

Rather than waste his limited time by bleating about the unfairness of it all, Ves would rather move on and make some progress.

"I have another question." He asked the acolyte. "You said the Redemption Duel is a second chance for the winner to live, but how is that possible? The amount of data channeled by the tampered neural interface will irreversibly damage the mech pilot's central nervous system! Even if Acolyte Gien wins the duel, he'll end up as a brain-dead vegetable!"

Acolyte Villis barely stirred from underneath her robe. "You are not responsible for the aftermath. You are only responsible for preparing Acolyte Gien's mech for battle. We have given you access to the tools and means to fulfill your mission."

"What's in it for me? How does my work benefit the Vandals?"

Ves hadn't been paying too much attention to the previous negotiation with the Coinlord, so he wasn't sure why he needed to play along in the first place.

"Insure that Acolyte Gien wins the Redemption Duel, and we will shower you with rewards. Not only will we charge ten percent less K-coins for the services we provide, you are also entitled to a personal boon from the Soulless Priest himself!"

"What does this personal boon entail?" Ves asked with a frown. "No offense, but I'm not sure I want anything to do with the Soulless Priest. We are not exactly alike."

Certainly, the ten percent discount was a significant reward to the Vandals, but Ves did not care too much about their budgetary concerns. The Flagrant Vandals recently defeated the Castle Breakers during their visit to the Mancroft Independent Harbor. Fencing the spoils with the help of the Omen of Misfortune must have netted the Vandals a couple of billion of credits.

Right now, the Vandals shouldn't be too short on liquid funds.

"Remember that you will be competing against a rival guest, who will be preparing the mech of Acolyte Gien's opponent." She said as she summoned a small projection from her comm. "Your rival will be competing for the same reward, one that is coveted by many among the designers of the frontier."

The projection beamed from her comm displayed a fancy-looking invitation card. It allowed its bearer to become initiated in an exclusive black market

society called the Angel's Wing Foundation. A stylized angel wing that transitioned from white to black served as their symbol.

He had never heard of this particular club before. "What is the Angel's Wing Foundation?"

The acolyte cackled. "A true son and daughter of the frontier never asks that question! You ask what the Angel's Wing Foundation does? Silly! The Foundation is one of the most exclusive invitation-only black markets in the galactic rim! Their reach stretches across tens of thousands of lightyears! Their black markets are physically present in so many star sectors that they can smuggle anything that can be found in the galactic rim to your doorstep!"

Ves became truly intrigued now. "The Foundation trades in anything? What about mechs? Technologies? Exotics? Slaves?"

"The Foundation does not dabble in the sorts of goods that mech designers are interested in." The Acolyte responded in an amused tone. "Yet before you shake your head and turn away, know that the Foundation is one of the most premier sources of anything biological. It offers the finest gene mod templates, gene boost elixirs, rare and powerful exobeasts and exoflora, biological implants and much, much more!"

Though Ves appeared incredibly excited at what he heard, inwardly he felt a chill. This sounded exactly like something the Five Scrolls Compact would run!

He felt rather strange to hear Acolyte Villis praise the Foundation so enthusiastically. Her enthusiasm for shilling the Foundation matched her devotion to Haatumak.

"The Angel's Wing Foundation sounds like an impressive marketplace. How hard is it to obtain their invitation?"

"Extremely hard. This is a chance that you can only meet, but never seek out. If our Church was not a supplier for the Foundation, we wouldn't be able to extend an invitation to you as a reward for completing your assignment."

Rewarding Ves with an invitation sounded incredibly generous for the Church of Haatumak. If he hadn't suspected that the Church and the Foundation were backed by the same shadow organization, then he would have been grateful for the generous reward.

As it was, Ves figured this was just a case of the left hand passing something to the right hand. It didn't cost the Church anything to hand over this exclusive invitation because they probably possessed a *carte blanche* to distribute them whenever they felt like doing so.

Still, it wouldn't do for Ves to show that he was clueless. "Why are you so generous with handing out this invitation? Shouldn't you be keeping it to yourselves?"

"As I said, we are already a fixed supplier to the Foundation. They hand over a small number of invitations to us every standard year, but frankly we do not have any preference where they end up. The Soulless Priest has full discretion on how to employ them. He must have approved of you in some way, or wishes you to make a full effort, so he has promised you this invitation if you win."

Hearing the acolyte's answer only furthered his suspicion. In fact, Ves started to doubt if Acolyte Villis was as simple as she looked. Her title and behavior made it seem as if she was just a low-ranking peripheral member of the church, yet her advanced age and her insights made her sound sagely at times.

Ves closed his eyes and paused. While the Church of Haatumak hadn't pushed Ves to participate in a gruesome ritual, this assignment came with a lot of complications that he would rather do without.

First, did he even want the reward? Certainly, Ves always felt troubled by his modified biology. Having been investigated by various doctors and experts including those employed by the CFA and the Friday Coalition, they had all admitted defeat when presented with the radical and incomprehensible Jutland organ.

That piece of semi-alien flesh in his chest represented a ticking time bomb that might explode within a few decades from now. While that didn't sound too bad for a normal person, Ves intended to live at least a few hundred years, so he required an urgent solution for the problem.

Who better to turn to than the masters of biology? The Angel's Wing Foundation had likely been set up as an offshoot of the Five Scrolls Compact. Since Dr. Jutland used to hail from that organization as well, the odds of finding an expert who could permanently solve the biological hazards within his body was a lot higher than engaging with the much less impressive Clifford Society.

Though there were always risks to becoming involved with the Five Scrolls Compact, as long as Ves remained prudent, he shouldn't catch their attention.

He decided to aim for the invitation. No matter what obstacles stood in his way, Acolyte Gien needed to win!

Chapter 700 Evaporating Spear

Countless black markets and closed societies existed in the galaxy. Some opened their doors to anyone that entered. The physical black markets at the Harkensen and Mancroft star systems served as iconic examples in the Komodo Star Sector.

Their barrier for entry was so low that practically any random seven-year old could jump over the fence. To call them black markets besmirched the reputation of all other black markets.

"They're more like the light version of black markets."

Due to their open nature and wide reach, a lot of paupers and poorly-connected power players tended to frequent these markets. This meant that while there would be a lot of customers for sellers to rip off, they weren't all that well-moneyed.

In order for a buyer to get the good stuff, they needed to veer to a more exclusive black market. One which matched buyers and sellers with more discerning standards, and one which could provide much more security and guarantees than a market stall in some dingy market stall at a murky space station where anyone could get shot at for no reason at all.

Ves already experienced the benefits of a higher class of trading platform at the Clifford Society. Its virtual and physical marketplaces were basically highly dignified black markets. Ves could obtain a number of exclusive goods and services that would have landed the providers in trouble if they offered them up to the open market.

Naturally, buyers needed to be somewhat trustworthy and possess enough wealth to make up the demand side of the black markets. The entry requirements to a rim-wide black market should have been quite stringent, but somehow the Soulless Priest judged that Ves possessed the qualifications to make a play at the invitation.

"I'll just have to win this design duel, because that's what the Redemption Duel effectively amounts to. There's no free lunch in the galaxy." Ves whispered to himself as he beheld the Evaporating Spear that stood before him.

The old, rusted frame of the mech looked rather pithy, and Ves knew it would take a lot of work and ingenuity to get it up and running with a modicum of battle effectiveness.

Though the Redemption Duel ostensible centered around a duel to the death between two mech pilots that fought while enduring unimaginable torture, Ves largely disregarded their story and their skill level.

As long as mech pilots were somewhat competent and similar to each other, the outcome of the Redemption Duel depended more on the mech designer than anyone else.

That was because the tampered neural interfaces threw all of the rules out of the window!

Ves stared at the depressed-looking figure sitting slumped at a pile of crates fashioned into a makeshift chair. Acolyte Gien presented a sorry figure with his worn-out pilot suit and his torn and half-broken robes. He was by far the most pathetic worshipper of Haatumak that Ves had encountered so far.

Gien exhibited a nihilistic attitude to his upcoming duel.

To be frank, Ves would be bummed out as well if he found out he'd be put inside a cockpit that wanted to make him taste the feeling of hell while being pushed out into space and be expected to fight for his life while his very nerves and brains burned from all of the overstimulation of signals.

He could not even see the point of winning. What would the acolyte gain from that when he'd be brain dead anyway?

"Don't underestimate our ability to restore the winner of the duel to life."

Acolyte Villis responded when Ves puzzled over that question. The old woman continued to follow close to his heels for some reason. "The Redemption Duel is an arduous trial that will test their worthiness in the eyes of Haatumak.

Those that perish deserve to perish. Those that survive are deserving of Haatumak's Mercy."

"And what does Haatumak's Mercy entail?" Ves asked, curious of what they would do to restore a braindead mech pilot back to a semblance of life.

"Haatumak's Mercy is a ritual of rebirth. Whoever shall win will be ordained as our newest Living Altar!"

Ves blinked. He could argue that transitioning from a living vegetable to a Living Altar was a punishment rather than a reward. Cannibalism wasn't so bad if you got to live again and received a free pass from your god!

He didn't even ask what kind of freak medical procedure the Church of Haatumak mastered to restore a burnt-out mech pilot back to a semblance of life. As far as Ves knew, almost every case of neural interface-induced overload onto a mech pilot's nerves resulted in catastrophic and irreparable damage!

He had a feeling the answer might upset him even more.

"Ignorance is bliss."

Practically every aspect involving this band of crazy fanatics drove him mad. Ves completely believed the decision to banish them from civilized space was justified. In fact, they should have gone a step further and send a CFA battleship to wipe out the Temple and all of its traces for good!

Then again, these bunch of crazies didn't mistreat their guests too badly and even dangled a carrot in front of his face.

Ves suspected this might be the only opportunity in his life to be offered an invitation to the Angel's Wing Foundation. In order to save his life from a dormant threat buried inside his chest, perhaps the crazy researchers of the Five Scrolls Compact may be his only hope for salvation!

His very life was at stake in this challenge!

"Win or lose, it is not only my pride that's at stake here!"

His motivation to win had skyrocketed!

Yet that was not enough to insure a win at the upcoming Redemption Duel.

He needed to get to work.

Ves looked around and ignored the condemned pilot for now. Rather than wracking his brains over his bum of a mech pilot, he'd rather start tooling with something he possessed an ample amount of familiarity.

He sat down behind a spare terminal and loaded in the documents and design schematics of the Evaporating Spear.

"Hm, what the hell is this travesty?"

A single glance at the schematics displayed an ugly combination of internal parts. They may have been built for lancers or melee mechs, but their synergy was poor and their implementation was even worse. The design resembled making a random grab of mech parts and stuffing them inside a poorly-optimized mech frame!

"This is a third-hand mech!"

Ves could read some of the history of the mech frame from the strange combination of mech parts. It originally started out as an affordable lancer mech. Its design must have come from a pirate designer with absolutely no respect for intellectual property. It seemed as if the initial designer had pirated a bunch of random component licenses that only vaguely had to do with this mech archetype.

The result was a poor-performing lancer mech that due to sheer luck possessed some merits compared to other pieces of trash developed by pirate designers in the frontier.

"Still, whoever designed the initial incarnation of the Evaporating Spear must have been a Novice Mech Designer."

The first incarnation of the Evaporating Spear must have been used for quite a number of years before it suffered a devastating stab in the back that pierced through the flight system and penetrated the cockpit from behind.

This attack had wrecked the Evaporating Spear. However, the clean, surgical strike it suffered left the rest of its frame largely intact. Once the winners of the battle salvaged the wreck, they only needed to replace its flight system and its cockpit while slapping over some makeshift armor plates in the rear to restore the mech to functionality.

"Hooking up a new cockpit to replace the old one is normally a huge issue. However, if the initial mech designer pirated the cockpit model from the galactic net, then the mech designer who restored the mech should have access to it as well."

Yet the restorer hadn't gone for this option. Instead, he tried to insert an entirely different cockpit model inside the empty gaping hole of the mech, to predictable results. Incompatibility problems must have plagued the second iteration of the Evaporating Spear throughout its rebirth.

A few more years passed by until the mech suffered a nasty blow that destroyed its left arms and torso and disabled its power reactor. After drifting in space for a lengthy period of time that spanned up to a decade, the wreck finally fell into the hands of the Church of Haatumak.

They assigned a mech designer to attempt to restore it. By now, the predecessor of Ves succeeded in doing a decent job at patching up the mech. The Evaporating Spear gained a new power reactor as well as a fully restored torso and arm to fill up the left side of the frame.

The only problem was that whoever the Church picked to restore the Evaporating Spear possessed an insufficient understanding of mechs and battle mechatronics. The replaced portions of the mech did not match the original layout of the frame.

"The restoration ruined its balance! The mech is asymmetric!"

There was nothing wrong with an asymmetric mech. However, the Novice originally designed his mech as a symmetrical mech. Throwing its center of gravity and balance out of whack ruined its entire flight and movement profile!

If the Evaporating Spear regained functionality and flew out of the hangar bay right now, its flight would probably lead to make a horizontal loop that resulted in a direct crash against the outer hull of the Temple of Haatumak!

The easiest way for Ves to prevent such a disaster was to tweak the flight system so that its 'steering wheel' permanently slanted a couple degrees towards the right.

"That's an awful fix. A software patch to compensate for a hardware inadequacy will only postpone a disaster in the making."

Ves would never allow such a lazy fix in his original mech designs. However, this time Ves was working with a dueling mech. With only two days to make something battle worthy out of this third-hand junk, he needed to cut a lot of corners to make it within the deadline.

"Well, it's not like this mech is meant to last the battle. The Soulless Priest will probably chuck it out into space once the Redemption Duel is done."

Ves only had to ready the Evaporating Spear for a single performance, rather than a lifetime of battle and use. Having worked with plenty of competition mechs before, he was already used to switching his mentality and set of values to accommodate a rush job.

After spending a precious half hour to analyze the design and decipher its secrets, Ves drew up a plan of action.

First, he needed to finish what his predecessor started and fix up the internal architecture until the mech became capable of activation.

Second, he needed to strengthen the overall frame and patch up the structural weaknesses that had grown as a result of all of the battle damage, neglect, corrosion and botched repairs it accumulated over the years.

Third and most importantly, Ves had to mitigate the ruinous effects of the tampered neural interface so that Acolyte Gien's effective genetic aptitude rose from F-grade to E-grade!

Since the Church forbid him from tweaking with the neural interface or cockpit, Ves had no choice but to tinker with the rest of the frame in order to achieve this effect!

"I'll have to work in reverse to manage this difficult feat!"

Theoretically, Ves figured out at least two methods to overcome this issue.

The root of the problem lay in the fact the neural interface overloaded the mech pilot with an excess of signals, with much of it consisting of junk data that only clogged up the tubes while polluting the data that was actually valid.

"I can either restrict the total flow of data, or find a way to decrease the proportion of junk data being transmitted back to the mech pilot!"

The problem may sound insurmountable at first, but Ves only required a quick moment of thought to come up with a number of viable solutions.