

### Chapter 781 City of Rus

The city displayed on the projection featured a fair amount of high rise structures. Most reached ten stories high though others reached as high as thirty stories.

Captain Byrd introduced the city to the Vandals attending the meeting.

"Classified as A27 when our fleet scanned the surface of Seven from orbit, this city is one of the fifty-odd major settlements that is dotting the planet's more stable hemisphere. There are no outward farms or sources of water in the vicinity, but we believe they cultivate their food in underground farms and derive their water from an underground stream."

Someone already raised her hand. "Won't that take a lot of energy, ma'am? Where are they getting their juice from?"

Captain Byrd raised her hand, causing another projection to appear. This one showed sensor readings of possible energy sources in the city.

"Despite the decrepit state of the city, it is very much an active one. While the age of the structures and the lack of expansion and growth suggests that the inhabitants have regressed, it is not to the point where they have forgotten how to build power reactors."

Chief Engineer Leslie Dakkon, one of the more experienced ones who survived the assassination attempts, analyzed the sensor readings made a tentative conclusion.

"The output of those power reactors don't look too high. The emissions they release also don't suggest any sophisticated reactions are taking place. They are definitely not making use of any of the high technology that the CFA is known to master. I think the total energy output is just enough to power the outdated antigrav modules that is protecting the city from Seven's gravity."

"Interesting observation." Captain Byrd tipped her head towards the chief engineer in appreciation. "A modern city that houses at least a hundred-thousand men and women consumes a lot more energy than the estimated output of these reactors. It is possible that A27 have developed other means of generating energy, but so far our scouts have been unable to observe any, though they are significantly hampered by the massive walls that surrounds the entire perimeter."

"Look at those old walls." Captain Orfan spoke up. "They're built for a reason. Look at how defensive it is. Look at the ditch they dug up, and the dents and scratches against its surface. The locals here are afraid of something. This is a city that has experienced many sieges."

The walls surrounding the city followed the shape of a circle instead of a pointed star. Nevertheless, it looked grand and formidable enough to withstand a mech raiding force, though there didn't appear to be any active defenses in view.

"Ma'am, have the scouts spotted any mechs or turrets?" Ves asked. "These walls don't look like they are meant to accommodate mechs taking cover behind them. The walls themselves don't look as if they are built to withstand mech-like attackers."

It looked like something a layman would design rather than something a modern fortification specialist might conjure up. The descendants of the crew of the Starlight Megalodon had truly regressed in many ways. Hundreds, maybe thousands of years may have passed since the crash before someone founded A27.

"None of our scouts have picked up any readings that match either mechs or any form of mechanized war machines such as tanks. This doesn't necessarily mean the inhabitants don't have them, but it is difficult for us to peer past the wall and the many dense structures to detect inactive vehicles."

"Have the scouts picked up any humans, ma'am?"

"None so far. We have picked up large quantities of heat signatures and other emissions that potentially match human bodies, but we have not been able to capture them on any of our optical sensors as of yet. We would need to fly over the city to make a visual confirmation, but we risk detection by the inhabitants if we do so. For now, the citizens of A27 remain ignorant of our presence."

A lot of other Vandals pitched in a word. Each of them derived various clues out of their observations. Though the sensors readings had been taken at long range in order to prevent the city from catching wind of the scouts, they possessed just enough detail to weave a story.

Captain Byrd looked satisfied at what the brainstorming session had come up with. "So far, we've derived a handful of possibilities from these observations. I think it is safe to say that the inhabitants are truly descended from the crew of the battleship, and that they have settled here in order to escape the pervasive influence of the battleship's ongoing catastrophe."

The projection flicked back to an aerial view of the less turbulent hemisphere of the planet.

"At least three-thousand years might have passed since the crash, but for some reason the amount of settlements haven't grown. The lack of growth and the emphasis on building high and thick walls around every settlement suggests that there is an outside threat that is keeping them locked within their cages."

"Uhm.. if there are beasts or something out there that poses a threat to these survivors, shouldn't we be worried about the threat as well?" A mech lieutenant asked. "We haven't set up any barriers around our base, and half of our mechs are pulled out of action because they are still waiting to be fixed."

"We can take them." Captain Orfan stated confidently. "We deployed enough mechs to cover every direction of attack. The ground is so hard and packed that anything attempting to burrow underneath us will face a nasty surprise."

Captain Byrd surprisingly backed up her rival's assertion. "I concur with that sentiment. Our defenses and alarm systems are more than adequate to anticipate any incoming threats. This is also an exceptionally barren region where no exobeasts should be able to survive. However, as soon as we move to the lush regions of the planet, there is a significant chance of encountering the threats the settlements have been guarding against for millenia."

"So what do we do, ma'am?"

"We proceed cautiously until we gather a sufficient amount of intelligence to form a plan in response. Since the regressed descendants of a battleship are able to fend off the threats, so can we. To do so we need information, and I prefer to gather them before our journey brings us into the more populated regions of the planet."

The map of the planet centered back onto the base, though it also incorporated A27 along with a couple of other settlements in the vicinity.

"I've been in discussion with Commander Lydia over this issue and we have decided to take a joint approach at this problem. Our first thrust is to continue sending out scouts. They will be sent increasingly farther from the camp until they reach the edge of the forests and prairies. Once there, I expect them to find signs of more active life."

A series of arrows pointed outwards to the nearest regions in questions. All of them looked lush and bountiful enough that they might be able to support millions of dangerous exobeasts.

Another line emerged from the camp. This one traced a mostly-direct path to A27, only detouring when encountering difficult or impassable terrain.

In fact, Seven looked as if it once suffered a serious impact that cracked its entire surface. This made traveling in straight lines very difficult. Some of the trenches in the terrain reached an estimated depth of several kilometers.

"Besides sending out scouts, I also intend to obtain relevant information by making contact with the inhabitants of A27." Captain Byrd announced. No one looked too surprised by that, as they all knew they would have made contact with the locals eventually. "One of the reasons why we have decided to land close to A27 is because it is the largest and most normal-looking cities that we have been able to determine from orbit. We can only hope that the descendants are.. civilized enough to be able to establish peaceful first contact."

The ranking officer deliberately used the phrase 'first contact' to emphasize that they wouldn't be making contact with a normal group of humans. With how much time they spent in isolation on this planet, their culture and society must have diverged enormously from modern human standards.

The CFA used to pride itself as one of the pinnacle organizations of the human race. For their descendants to fall to the point where they eked out a potentially miserable existence behind high and sturdy walls signified that too much had changed.

The descendants may carry the blood of the CFA, but they likely forgot the essence of what it meant to serve one of the Big Two.

"Who will be part of the first contact team?"

"I will be going personally to establish first contact with the citizens of A27." The captain stated. "I am the only one among the Vandals with an inkling of diplomatic training, so there is no one else who can do a better job. I wish to

bring a small number of experts along to observe the state of the city and its citizens and to provide consultation if necessary. Chief Dakkon, Mr. Larkinson, Dr. Tillman, the three of you shall be lending your expertise during first contact."

Ves feared such a request, but he half-expected it. Even if the inhabitants of A27 didn't appear to be making use of mechs, his depth of knowledge still made him a qualified general engineer who could provide an accurate assessment on many matters.

The same applied to Chief Engineer Dakkon. Even if it was unlikely that A27 operated any starships or shuttles, his expertise in large-scale machinery such as the industrial power reactors the scouts have recognized should be extremely relevant to their initial foray into the city.

Dr. Flosie Tillman on the other hand would be lending her expertise on the people and possible wildlife native to Seven. As a fairly young exobiologist, Dr. Tillman may not be the most competent researcher in her field, but she was one of the few the Flagrant Vandals managed to retain for whatever reason.

Since none of the experts in question objected to their assignment, Captain Byrd turned to Captain Orfan. "You and your assault company will be coming with me to provide some muscle. I think the sight of forty clean and deadly-looking mechs will be helpful in the negotiations to come."

"Why do I have to guard your wrinkly butt?! I'm not the only mech captain available here!"

"This 'wrinkly butt' of mine doesn't trust you to stay putt in camp. I'd feel much more reassured if you remain under my thumb. Besides, if first impressions have taken an awful turn, I am not above resorting to intimidation in order to force the locals into a dialogue. An aggressive boor like you speaks the same

language as the primitives we might encounter if the initial meeting goes sour."

Some of the Vandals tried to keep in their laughter. Even if the mech regiment maintained a cruder culture, it would still be bad form to laugh in the presence of their current commanding officer.

Captain Orfan on her part looked as if she wanted to bark Captain Byrd's head off, but she painstakingly held in her irritation. She wouldn't be able to win a confrontation because Major Verle put Byrd in charge.

"Very well, ma'am. I'll play guard dog for you. Just don't expect me to smile while I'm at it. I'm not the kind of dog who plays tricks on command."

Byrd ignored Orfan's grumbling. "I have one more detail to add. I won't be making contact with the locals alone. The Swordmaidens have a lot of experience in making contact with indigenous settlers in the frontier who have lost contact with the greater galaxy, so they will be sending their own delegation along with a mech company as guards."

"Will Commander Lydia be joining the first contact delegation, ma'am?"

"No. The commander will remain behind in the camp in order to take charge of its defense should any threats emerge. She has pledged to send a diplomat from her own ranks."

That added up to around eighty mechs to escort the first contact delegation as they attempted to make contact with the inhabitants of A27. Ves hoped that would be enough to deter any trouble.

### **Chapter 782 Heavy Babies**

Once the order had been given to establish first contact with the city with the temporary designation of A27, the entire camp went into a frenzy. Everyone received a couple of hours to prepare for the fairly lengthy trip.

Ves spent an hour checking over the forty mechs from Captain Orfan's assault company. Though some of the mechs deployed to the surface with various issues, most of them had been fixed by now, and the problems that remained required a lot of time to resolve.

The assault company's mech lineup lent itself well to a forceful assault where a combination of raw power and aggressive mobility enabled them to attack quickly and with considerable momentum.

True to the Vandals, all of the mechs consisted of Vesian-standard mechs looted from Vesian trade convoys and production facilities. In practice, this did not lead to too much inconvenience as long as the entire mech regiment stuck to the same standards.

Vesian mechs possessed their own idiosyncrasies that Ves became intimately aware of after months of having them under his supervision. He actually started to forget how a Brighter mech looked like.

Two controversies popped up at the end of the meeting earlier. One question was whether the first contact delegation would be joined by Venerable Karol Xie in his Pale Dancer.

Eventually, Captain Byrd denied the suggestion for various reasons. "From my understanding, the Pale Dancer still requires extensive tweaks to ready it for heavy gravity conditions, so will remain stuck in the workshop for the foreseeable time. In addition, I am not entirely reassured in leaving our portion of the camp without a champion that can deter Commander Lydia of the Swordmaidens. Besides, from the destitute state of their city, I don't think they are powerful enough to be able to match the strength of an expert pilot. This is a diplomatic mission, not a conquest mission."

Ves himself did not know what to make of Venerable Xie. He became a little less certain if his tampering on the neural interfaces produced the desired



result. At the very least, it appeared the side effects turned out to be more severe than anyone had anticipated.

It had grown so bad that Ves sneakily isolated himself with the Pale Dancer, activated his signal jammer, and quickly accessed its neural interface's programming to dial down the effects of his tampering.

Hopefully, this would lessen the side effects while preventing Venerable Xie from regaining his clarity regarding his old loyalties. Most crucially, Ves also tamped down the destructive performance boost so that the expert pilot would last a little longer before keeling over from wearing out his nerves.

The second issue was whether any of the Akkara heavy cannons would be joining the escorts. Both Captain Byrd and Ves shook their heads.

The Vandals did not send down a lot of heavy mechs for various reasons. First, the fleet needed them more in order to give their combat carriers a leg up in terms of ranged firepower. Second, the crushing gravity amplified the weight of a heavy mech that already weighed five times more than a medium mech into a nearly immovable boulder that suddenly weighed six times more than that!

In other words, a single heavy mech expended thirty times as much energy as a regular mech under standard gravity to move!

The energy budget of the ground forces squealed like a tortured pig each time the Vandals sent down another Akkara mech. They were so heavy that their strongest transport could only bring them down one by one.

In the end, they decided to send down just ten heavy mechs, and employ them as nothing more than base turrets.

Sending them out with the first contact delegation not only lengthened the trip by several times, they also negated most of the assault company's advantages in mobility.

The heavy mechs moved so slowly and expended so much energy that the Vandals had to improvise and design specialized legged transports to carry them over a distance at a faster pace but without expending too much energy.

It would have been ideal if the ground forces could make use of tracked or wheeled transports for their efficiency, but unfortunately Seven exhibited a lot of rough and even terrain that made such means of transportation impractical.

Babysitting these heavy mechs consumed an inordinate amount of attention and resources. Fortunately, Ves didn't need to pay too much attention to them after issuing a couple of instructions. The most important work consisted of building their 'chariots', and that involved other disciplines which the Vandals could perform on their own.

"I don't even know if bringing along these heavy mechs are more trouble than they are worth."

While they could pump out a lot of firepower, the Vandals opted to bring only a limited amount of ammunition for their ballistic cannons. Not only did the shells weigh so much that they burdened their transport capacity, the mechs were simply not very cost-effective on a planet that amplified everything's gravity by six times.

They couldn't even move outside of the influence of strong antigrav fields!

Compared to the chariots that needed more time to be assembled, Ves expressed much more interest in the so-called fast transports. These lighter legged transports resembled narrow beetles in their overall shape. Dedicated to transporting troops and passengers, they moved a lot faster than any of the cargo transports, enough to keep up with a company of mechs with active gravitic backpacks on a swift jog.

Of course, they wouldn't be visiting without supplies. A cargo transport would be taking part of the first contact mission as well, as the mechs needed the

extra batteries and energy cells to keep the gravitic backpacks mounted to the mechs fed.

Captain Byrd also ordered the cargo transport to be loaded with various valuables that they might be able to use to barter for goods or information from the natives. Data pads containing basic knowledge, small generators, anti-grav modules, junk exotics, nutrient packs and more had been stuffed in the cargo holds, just waiting to be traded away.

Out of respect for the CFA, Captain Byrd invested heavily in accomplishing a peaceful first contact. If the situation somehow devolved into violence, it was important for the Vandals and the Swordmaidens not to throw the first punch or provoke the locals into lashing out.

Ves found it kind of funny that the Vandals prioritized staying into the CFA's good graces even as they attempted to loot one of their crash-landed battleships. He wasn't even sure how they planned to get away with that deed, but then again a lot of shady dealings happened behind the scenes.

Before Ves boarded the fast transport which would be carrying Captain Byrd and her staff, he spent some time in incorporating his new present into his combat armor.

Compared to the small backup knives embedded into hidden compartments into his armor, the Cadisis was larger but infinitely more capable. Ves experimentally punched the tip through a spare piece of armor plating and managed to punch it through with only a moderate effort on his part.

After performing a few more tests in which the stiletto-style knife remained as sharp as ever, Ves expressed his admiration at its craftsmanship. "What an amazing weapon! This weapon is built to pierce through armor!"

A hunger for knowledge ignited in his heart. The techniques involved in forging this weapon was exquisite. The alloys utilized to make it so strong yet

so sharp remained a mystery to Ves, because when he put it under a scanner, the device simply failed to register the object!

"How is it able to evade the scanning?"

Ves immediately understood that the swordsmith incorporated an entirely different form of stealth than the stealth tech that he painstakingly studied. The Six-Sided Dice that he built with Avanaeon relied entirely on active stealth systems that ran on power, while the unassuming-looking Cadicis evaded almost every form of detection due to its material composition alone!

"I'm going to need an industrial scanner tweaked to exacting settings if I ever want to figure out its composition." He sighed.

His private lab at the Mech Nursery contained such a rig, but out here on the field he had access to no such thing. For now, the Cadicis remained as inscrutable as the Amestendira.

"At least I figured out some more uses for this gift."

The Amastendira was his trump card that he didn't really wish to show off whenever he landed himself in a spot of trouble. As the previous incident with the Acolyte in the shuttle had shown him, the weapon was way too powerful for its own good, and dialing down its standard power setting took too long in emergencies.

The weapon also released too much emissions that made it impossible for Ves to employ the weapon with any degree of stealth.

The Cadicis on the other hand exemplified stealth, especially after Ves incorporated it into a hidden holster integrated in his Earth Ant's vambrace. Upon activating a hidden command, the Cadicis discreetly slid out into his armored palm, allowing him to wield the weapon in a stable grip out of sight and without throwing up any noise.

Of course, outwardly Ves maintained the illusion of being nothing more than a noncombatant with hardly any combat power. The Earth Ant had been designed to look as plain an non-threatening as powerful for a suit of light combat armor. While it looked a little thicker than the combat armor worn by other support personnel, an enemy would probably chalk it up to his insecurity.

The only weapon he deigned to carry outwardly was a standard-issue laser pistol. While he would have ordinarily chosen to carry a ballistic pistol to balance out the Amastendira's damage type, any form of projectile weapons simply performed like crap on this heavy gravity planet. They only maintained their effectiveness under the influence of antigrav fields, which didn't cover much terrain at all.

"Mr. Larkinson! It's time! Captain Byrd requests you to board the fast transport with immediate haste!"

"I'm coming!"

Ves waved away the messenger and quickly adorned his Earth Ant after he completed his jury-rigged modifications. The combat armor felt as responsive as ever, and a quick check to its systems showed that he didn't screw anything up.

Satisfied with his preparations, he grabbed a spare infantry-sized gravitic backpack and attached it to the standardized slot in the rear of his armor.

Everyone wore one by default. If they ever found themselves outside of the influence of an antigrav field, they needed to rely on it to see themselves to safety before its batteries expired.

Exiting the workshop, Ves crossed the base and walked to the edge of the camp where a full mech company stood in an impressive-looking column. The tall mechs made for an intimidating sight, and the Vandals hoped that the

sight of them would be enough to deter any malicious thoughts from the natives they were about to contact.

As Ves walked up to the ramp extended from the fast transport, he entered its shuttle-like interior and found that heavily-armed security officers occupied most of the seats.

He tracked down the other experts at the very front of the passenger compartments. He plopped himself down on one of the oversized seats meant to accommodate exoskeleton soldiers and greeted the man sitting in the next chair over.

"Hey. You're Chief Dakkon, right?"

"Yep." The older man replied. "I've heard about you as well. You're the famously young head designer of our little club. When we first heard a squirt like you got field promoted to your current posting, none of us thought you'd be able to keep all of our mechs together. We all expected you to crash and burn in a couple of weeks."

Ves grinned. "Well, sorry to beat your expectations, but not a lot of mechs have blown up under my watch. So, which starship did you come from? I haven't seen you before."

"That's not a surprise because I'm one of the chief engineers of the Beggar's Bounty. While my main responsibility is to keep the fat logistics ship running, I'm also cross-trained in heavy industrial machinery. That makes me very suitable to help oversee the industrial activities the ground forces are engaged with. All of our mining activities and the production of the legged transports fall under my watch."

Ves looked very surprised at Dakkon. He hadn't expected to meet such a capable engineer among the Vandals. He suddenly grew very interested in the older man.

## Chapter 783 Chief Leslie Dakkon

As both a ship engineer and a mechanical engineer, Dakkon possessed a very broad base of knowledge.

While someone like Chief Avanaeon may be more in tune with the most complicated aspects of starships such as their FTL drives, Chief Dakkon was more of a jack-of-all-trades that made him suitable to take up a leadership post on a logistics ship.

"It sounds like you didn't start off as a ship engineer." Ves remarked.

"True. I never imagined I ended up in the Mech Corps." Chief Dakkon sighed as the fast transport and its escort of mechs started to get underway. The journey to A27 took roughly a standard day, so they had plenty of time to chat.

"As you've no doubt noticed, I used to start off as a mechanical engineer with a specialty in heavy equipment. After I got my degree, I worked at several industrial manufacturers that manufactured everything from ore harvesters to space station components."

"Did you enjoy it?"

"Of course I did! I constantly participated in projects involving different machines. I became good at my job as well and received promotion after promotion."

"What about mechs? Did you ever get in touch with them?"

"Nope. I don't have any desire to work with mechs at all."

"How so?"

The chief turned to Ves. "This may sound like news to you, but not everyone is nuts for mechs. To be frank, they disgust me. The introduction of mechs to humanity hasn't curbed our race's destructive instincts at all. They merely channeled them in a more accessible format where the damage is limited to a level below where they are a threat to entire planets."

The sudden vehemence in the chief engineer's voice along with the familiar argument stoked Ves' recognition. "You sound like one of those peace advocates."

"Guilty as charged! I used to be a member of the Old Pacifists even. We used to believe we were one of the few people who believed that humanity is better than their murderous, infighting ways."

"What changed?"

"I screwed up on the job." Chief Dakkon averted his eyes from Ves and stared down at the deck. "I made an inexcusable error and earned the ire of my employer. The only way I escape retaliation without leaving the Bright Republic was to join the Mech Corps. When the Old Pacifists found out, they kicked me out of the club. I didn't miss them anyway. After spending a lot of time with the Vandals, I realized that humans are too greedy to put down their warring ways. Once I accepted that fact, I kept my head down and worked earnestly for my new home until I was promoted to chief engineer. That's my life's story in a nutshell. Boring, is it not?"

"I don't agree." Ves said gently. "The Flagrant Vandals are filled with interesting people who have made mistakes but are working to redeem themselves. Everyone has a unique story to tell."

"Well, don't pry so much if you know what's good for you, kid. Not everyone appreciates it if someone airs their secrets."

They strayed away from the chief's background and instead turned their discussion towards their work. Talking shop benefited them both as they exchanged new ideas and cast a different perspective on matters.

Ves quickly found out that while he mastered a lot more theory, Chief Dakkon possessed an advantage in both experience and problem solving capacity.

The man also turned out to be a font of handy little insights.



"So you designed these legged transports, right?"

"I wouldn't say that I'm the designer of the transports." Dakkon immediately pushed back. "I've merely borrowed a template design from the central database and spent a couple of months on refining its design to suit our circumstances. I didn't expect the terrain of Seven to be so difficult to traverse in many places, though, so I that's why it's taking longer than we anticipated to get the legged transports up and running. Their legs need to be longer in order to traverse most of the complex terrain."

"How fast can they run?"

"Not a lot. They're meant to move outside of the influence of an antigrav field in order to conserve energy. While those antigrav modules, it wastes a lot of energy, so its more efficient to design the legged transports with greater power than to lighten them up. The only downside that comes with this efficiency is that the transports can only run thirty to forty kilometers an hour at most, though I won't be surprised if that dips down to twenty kilometers an hour."

"At that pace, it's going to take us ages to traverse to the other side of the planet."

"We don't have any other choice. Our mechs can run faster as long as their gravitic backpacks are supplied with energy, but they are already running through them like they're sieves. Our engineers have to divert a lot of effort into finding means to generate more energy on our own in order to recharge our spent energy cells and batteries."

The root of their survival and longevity on the surface rested on their ability to manage their energy supply. Good energy management enabled them to go on longer without depending on outside help.

The ground forces initially touched down in the calmer hemisphere of the planet. Right now, there weren't too many barriers in place that prevented the Vandals and the Swordmaidens to be supplied from the fleet up in orbit.

All of this would change once the ground expedition crossed over into the turbulent hemisphere. The closer they got to the Starlight Megalodon, the harder it was to remain in contact with the fleet up in orbit. The increasing amount of turbulence eventually cut them off entirely, leaving the ground forces to fend for themselves.

So trying to start off on the right foot in terms of energy management immediately became their primary concern. Chief Dakkon and the other engineers, technicians and machinists all shouldered a huge burden. Without their constant efforts, the ground forces would never make it all the way to the Starlight Megalodon without running out of energy and supplies.

As time went by, the passengers started to get bored. As the fast transport moved towards A27 alongside another crawler from the Swordmaidens, people inside started taking naps and ate nutrient packs whenever they grew hungry.

By the time the delegation arrived at the city, the sky looked as bright as ever. In fact, the brightness of the astral winds annoyed so many Vandals and Swordmaidens that they started to wear protective visors or ocular augments in order to prevent their eyes from straining.

Others simply unfolded the helmets of their hazard suits or combat armor in order to save their eyes the trouble.

The fast transport halted five kilometers away from the walls of A27. Ves peered in the distance and admired its apparent. The patina and rust adorning the walls alluded to a rich history.

Captain Byrd collected the three experts together in an elevated compartment of the fast transport. The roof started to fold back while the deck rose into the air, placing them onto the upper surface of the vehicle.

"A27 stands before us." She began. "Right now, our main challenge is to initiate peaceful contact. To do so, we'll have to convince them that we don't have any hostile intentions to their city. I'm not sure whether they are familiar with mechs. It could be that they have lost the technology to field them into battle, so there is a risk that they'll mistake our mechs as giant monsters. Do you have any suggestions to facilitate peaceful contact?"

The young female exobiologist spoke up first. "I've been studying the markings on the walls and they definitely show signs of being attacked by exobeasts that are even larger than most mechs. Most of them appear to have been inflicted by quadrupeds or multi-limbed exobeasts, so the sight of upright mechs should be sufficiently distinguishable from whatever it is they are fending off."

"Good point, Dr. Tillman. While it is impossible to predict how they will react to mechs, it is necessary for us to project a certain amount of strength as well, so I will bring at least four of them along to impress upon the rulers of the city that we mean business. Any other suggestions?"

Chief Dakkon raised an important point. "I know that wireless communication is kind of borked under all of this interference, but why not try to send a powerful transmission first? If they still operate functioning transceivers, it may be possible to start a discussion at a safe distance."

"No." Captain Byrd shook her head. "First impressions are important. They may not even believe who we are if we attempt to hail them from a distance."

After entertaining a bit more feedback, she eventually decided to just stand on top of the fast transport and slowly approach the walled city under a modest escort of four mechs.

As the small delegation detached itself from the rest of the mech company that would be staying behind in case they needed backup, the fast transport dictated their pace as it crawled into view of the city and vica versa.

Though the errant distortion made long-ranged detection rather hard, the large transports and mechs should have been visible long ago. Disconcertingly, the city exhibited no reaction at their approach.

As the range fell to a kilometer, the city seemed like a dead husk rather than a thriving settlement. However, the increasingly-detailed sensor readings revealed that A27 hosted at least a hundred-thousand people, all of them spread through every part of the city.

By the time the fast transport stood five-hundred meters away, Captain Byrd ordered a halt.

Silence dominated the plains before the city wall and its ditch. After several minutes of patient waiting, Byrd came to the decision that the inhabitants wouldn't be making the first move any time soon.

"Transmit my voice over the loudspeaker." She ordered one of the operators of the fast transport. "Amplify and project my voice towards the city. Let's see them ignoring us now."

Once the transport's 'mouth' opened up to reveal a shaped loudspeaker built just for this purpose, Captain Byrd started to greet the city in the simplest manner possible.

"TO THE PEOPLE INHABITING THE CITY BEFORE US! WE ARE VISITORS FROM BEYOND THE SKY. YOUR ANCESTORS FROM THE COMMON

FLEET ALLIANCE ARE KNOWN TO US. WE GREET YOU IN THE NAME OF FRIENDSHIP AND TRADE."

Despite projecting Captain Byrd's booming voice over the entire city, not a single human showed up to give a reply. The mech captain waited for an entire minute before speaking again.

'WE HAVE COME FROM BEYOND THE STARS TO HELP YOU ESTABLISH CONTACT WITH THE OUTSIDE GALAXY. WE CAN HELP YOUR CITY BECOME STRONGER. WE HAVE BROUGHT FOOD AND TECHNOLOGY SUCH AS ADDITIONAL POWER REACTORS AND ANTIGRAV MODULES. WE ARE PREPARED TO TRADE ALL OF OUR GOODS IN EXCHANGE FOR FRIENDSHIP AND INFORMATION."

Another gnawing silence followed after those words. The city didn't appear to be rousing itself in response to Captain Byrd's enticement at all.

"Have the descendants gone deaf or something?" Chief Dakkon wondered.

"That's unlikely." Doctor Tillman rejected the suggestion. "The environmental conditions here does not give any reason for humans to decouple themselves from their hearing."

Ves threw out another guess. "Maybe their prevailing language has drifted so far from standard human language that they don't even understand what we're saying."

"That is a possibility, but it is unlikely if they have maintained a certain degree of technology from the CFA." Captain Byrd replied. "I believe that the inhabitants are simply flustered by encountering something entirely different from the threats that they have faced so far. We need to give them time to make sense of our presence and form a unified response."

"I have a bad feeling about this, though." Ves cautiously said. "They had plenty of time to see us coming, and they would have definitely heard your

greeting by now. What if they are preparing something other than a peaceful response?"

An alarm suddenly rang from the transport.

"Detecting incoming ordnance from the city! Take cover!"

All of them directed their attention towards the city. Of all the possible responses they could muster, the Vandals never expected the city to launch air-car-sized boulders at them with great force and speed! Though the heavy gravity pulled them down the ground rather quickly, they still ranged far enough to crash in the vicinity of the fast transport!

"Retreat!"

A second volley of boulders slammed into the terrain next to the transport and its modest escort. Neither the transport nor the mechs possessed any armaments that could intercept the boulders, so they couldn't do anything against the rocks!

#### **Chapter 784 A Rocky Star**

The rocks stopped being able to reach the fleeing transport and mechs after passing roughly a kilometer of distance. Simple gravity prevented the rocks from flying any further, though they rolled forward at a considerable distance even when they landed.

Ves immediately recognized that the rocks had deliberately been chiseled into a rounded shape to facilitate the rolling motion.

Even though launching rocks seemed to be an incredibly primitive form of attack, the possible damage they could inflict was no joke! Their transport would have suffered a huge dent if hit!

The main problem with relying on throwing boulders was that they weren't very accurate. While the rocks launched under standard gravity conditions

inside the city, once the projectiles left the antigrav field that surrounded the city, they almost literally started dropping like rocks.

That limited their eventual range to a kilometer away at best.

"Did the inhabitants of the city employ a catapult or trebuchet?" Dr. Tillman asked with a puzzled frown.

Nobody knew why the city launched rocks at them instead of firing shells or lasers at the delegation. Still, Captain Byrd did not take the hostile response to heart. The reaction of the city revealed much.

"They're still alive, that's for certain. Their technology level seems to have regressed beyond our what we have anticipated, and we're not certain if they still speak the same language as us. However, if they fear us enough to attack us with their boulder weapons, then we share at least one common language. The language of violence."

"Uhh.. what about the diplomatic approach, ma'am?" Ves asked.

"The time for the soft approach is over. If we continue to approach the city meekly after they launched rocks at us, they'll consider us as pushovers. Right now, we need to give them a good wakeup call in order to drag them to the negotiating table. For that, we'll need to coordinate with the Swordmaidens."

The Swordmaidens had been content to let Captain Byrd take the lead in the initial contact. The transport holding their representative and escorts on foot had remained behind with the rest of the mechs on standby.

As the fast transport approached its Swordmaiden counterpart and rested next to the other vehicle, a Swordmaiden crossed over to the Vandals.

"Captain Clarissa."

"Hah! Captain Byrd!" The savage-looking Swordmaiden greeted with a mocking grin. "I told you that those who are holed up in their settlements won't be happy to see you. To them, you're monsters or aliens that they haven't seen yet. A city as battered and stagnant as theirs will always lash out violently when visitors pop up out of the blue."

Captain Clarissa appeared to be a formidable Swordmaiden who exhibited several wild traits that made it seem she had spent much of her youth in a tribal settlement. The bones of her exobeast kill adorned her entire armor as proof of her individual prowess. The characteristic greatsword of the Swordmaidens rested comfortably behind her back.

The two captains started to huddle together in a corner to discuss what they derived from the initial contact. Ves tried to eavesdrop as best as possible without straying too close.

From their initial discussion, they agreed that while it may be possible to eventually convince the city of their peaceful intentions, it may take several days or weeks to build up an accord with the rulers of the city.

This was an unacceptable delay as the Flagrant Swordmaidens acutely needed to obtain more information about the possible threats they might encounter in their travels.

After an extensive discussion involving lots of speculation and guesswork, they decided to take the forceful approach in the next attempt. Both the Swordmaidens and the Vandals would be bringing their full mech companies into view. Perhaps the sight of eighty mechs might shock the inhabitants into resorting to other means than launching rocks at anything that came close to the walls.



Eighty mechs stepped forward in unison and marched in ranks as best they could on the slightly uneven terrain. A27's walls loomed closer and closer, though this time their transports crawled well behind the columns of mechs.

Once the mechs had reached a kilometer away from the city walls, they halted and spread out to make it harder for the city to target them all. Various melee mechs stood in front including all of their knights. The ranged mechs all readied their laser rifles in the event their services would be needed.

This time, Captain Byrd adopted a more forceful tone as the fast transport projected her voice towards the city. "INHABITANTS OF THE CITY BEFORE US. WE COME IN FRIENDSHIP AND PEACE. WE SEEK TO TRADE AND EXCHANGE INFORMATION. AT NO POINT DO WE WANT TO GO TO WAR OR ATTEMPT TO TAKE OVER YOUR CITY. HOWEVER, IF YOU CONTINUE TO IGNORE US OR LAUNCH AN ATTACK ON OUR FORCES, WE WON'T HESITATE TO TEACH YOU A LESSON!"

Ten seconds later, A27 sent out their response. They launched a volley of five rocks in the direction of the spread out mechs. None of them fell far enough to pose any direct threat to the mechs, though the rolling boulders forced some of the mechs to move aside in order to avoid a dent.

"ATTACKS ON OUR FORCES WILL NOT BE TOLERATED. IF YOU DO NOT CEASE YOUR ATTACKS IMMEDIATELY, WE WILL RESPOND IN KIND."

A second volley of rocks showed the inhabitants hadn't changed their minds. Captain Byrd continued to exhort the people of A27 to put down their hostilities using various arguments, but none of them really hit home. The city appeared to have stockpiled thousands of boulders from the way they continued to launch them towards the Vandals and Swordmaidens.

At some point, the fast transport hastily crawled to the side when one of the boulders rolled straight at the vehicle.

At that point, Captain Byrd accepted that verbal persuasion was unlikely to work. If the inhabitants got it in their heads that they could throw lethal rocks at the Flagrant Swordmaidens without suffering any retaliation, all their subsequent attempts at contact would be coming from a position of weakness.

"It's time to teach these yokels that we aren't as toothless as they think. Ranged mechs, open fire at your preselected targets! Begin at twenty-five percent strength!"

Half of their mechs started firing laser beams at only a quarter strength. Each of those laser beams lanced out towards the center of the walls. While the simultaneous discharge looked extremely impressive, the lasers hadn't actually inflicted a lot of surface damage to the thick and solid walls.

Not only did the laser beams possess only a fourth of their regular potency, the rifleman mechs all aimed at different portions of the wall. The initial salvo of laser beams was meant to wake the inhabitants up and to give them a good scare.

Half a minute went past before the city launched another volley of five rounded boulders in the direction of the Vandals and the Swordmaidens.

Ves was starting to think that these insular descendants needed a good smacking until they came to sense.

The mechs repeated their half-hearted laser discharges, which besides looking pretty really didn't do much more than to vaporize some of the surface layers while heating up the alloy wall at certain sections.

"Okay, it's time to stop handling them with kid gloves. Switch to the follow-up plan! Set power to a hundred percent, and focus your fire on the wall section next to the gates!"

The wall wasn't entirely uniform. Gates had been built in each cardinal direction, and they were large and tall enough to fit two mechs walking abreast.

Damaging the gates directly disincentivized the defenders from opening them up, while damaging a distant section of the wall might not alarm them as much. This was why the rifleman targeted the section just next to the western gate.

As the lasers burned brighter and hotter, forty of them instantly carved out a hole in the exact same spot.

A hole rapidly started forming on the thick alloy surface! Ves sat behind one of the consoles integrated in the fast transport and tracked the damage inflicted by the lasers. The intense heat caused the surrounding alloy to glow and blacken while the lasers continued to melt and vaporize anything in their way!

In just a couple of seconds, they already dug a couple of meters straight into the thick solid mass!

As the lasers encountered a new layer of alloy consisting out of more resistant material, the defenders started launching their rocks as fast as they could manage. In their evident panic, the launchers fell out of sync, causing some to launch their rocks faster than others.

The transports had already receded well beyond the effective range of the rocks, while the nimble rifleman mechs easily dodged the falling and rolling boulders as they continued to fire their lasers unerringly into the deepening hole their weapon carved out!

Even as the laser weapons started to accumulate a burst of heat, the Vandal and Swordmaiden rifleman mechs continued to persist until they finally bore straight through the other end of the wall!

All of the rifles immediately halted their fire. The visitors wanted to make a point, not to inflict any actual harm on the residents.

Silence emerged on the battlefield as the rocks stopped being launched in the direction of the mechs. Perhaps their thick skulls started to understand that they would continue to be sitting ducks if they kept hiding behind their walls to launch ineffective projectiles against the nimble mechs.

"At least they stopped launching rocks at us. That's good news, right?" Chief Dakkon asked.

"I won't be so sure of that. Whoever they are, I doubt they dropped their evident xenophobic stance at us." Ves replied. In situations like this, he always feared the worst.

"The west gate is opening!"

The thick double gates slowly shifted open at a snail's pace. The incredible weight and size of the gates made it difficult for anything to shift them open. The rifleman mechs could have easily interrupted the agonizingly slow process, but Captain Byrd ordered no such thing.

It was time for these mysterious inhabitants to reveal their faces to the visitors.

Three minutes later, the formerly-closed gates widened up to reveal a broad avenue. Just as Ves analyzed the glimpse they obtained of the interior of the city, a massive creature lumbered into sight.

"That's an exobeast!" Dr. Tillman called! "It's a warm-blooded, quadruped exobeast! I don't see any traces of Earth-based creatures in its appearance. This is an adaptive native exobeast!"

"Look at what's above!" Ves immediately identified a tiny presence on the top of the reptile-looking creature's rocky, scaly hide. "There's a human mounted on a saddle above the creature's back!"

Ves, Chief Dakkon and Dr. Tillman rapidly derived the exobeast's properties as the creature slowly lumbered through the gates and parked itself in front of the city gates.

"The exobeast weighs as much as a heavy mech, if not more."

"The creature is an adult or an elder of its species. It's likely an apex species of this planet, as I can hardly imagine that this planet can support anything larger!"

"Strong readings are emanating from the large crystals embedded in the forehead, chest and various parts of its body. These are.. they're some kind of energy reservoirs! No, not only that, but they act as antigrav modules as well!"

Another mounted exobeast joined the first one. This one looked to be of an entirely different creature, though Dr. Tillman identified several similarities.

A third one appeared after the second one. A fourth one appeared after the third.

One by one, the city revealed their offensive might as the giant ridden exobeasts continued to step out of the gates until ten of them lined up in an intimidating row under the evident control of their riders!

At some command, the huge and deadly looking beasts opened up their maws and started to unleash an awful roar towards the Flagrant Swordmaidens!

"The savages are challenging us!"

#### **Chapter 785 Mulak**

The biggest question in everyone's mind was whether the survivors of the Starlight Megalodon artificially cultivated these exobeasts. It seemed too preposterous to the Vandals and the Swordmaidens that the descendants managed to tame these powerful and savage exobeasts by relying on their charm.

Everyone paid a lot of attention to their local exobiologist Dr. Tillman, who endured a lot of pressure trying to figure out as much as possible from their appearances.

None of them expected the locals to use mounted exobeasts as war machines!

"Taming and mounting exobeasts is more common throughout the galaxy than you think." She remarked. "Those action dramas where exobeast riders are battling against each other somewhat reflect the truth. When people get stranded on a planet with giant exobeasts, their first thought is to defend against their aggression. Their second thought is to harness their power for their own uses. If they succeed, they have secured what is in all purposes a warbeast that can contend against mechs."

"So.. that makes it unlikely that the city fields any mechs?" Chief Dakkon asked.

"It isn't easy to keep an exobeast docile. Look at how big those creatures are. None of them appear to be herbivores either. These are apex predators who have grown close to the theoretical size limitations on unmodified organisms. I cannot tell whether the genes of the exobeasts in front of us are tampered with, but so far I have not detected any traces of human-directed optimizations."

That did not rule out that these reptilian-like exobeasts received some tune-ups. Those who tampered with their species had been very conservative in their intervention if someone did interfere in their evolution.

"Isn't this planet terraformed by the crew of the Starlight Megalodon?" Ves asked. "If that is true, then shouldn't these beasts be croaking or something?"

"It may be that the terraforming is less extensive than we initially expected. At the very least, the changes in the ecosystem and the change in air mixture

may in fact have benefited these beasts more than others. Perhaps they are one of the few surviving apex predators that have survived the transition."

Too many explanations existed for them to make a solid conclusion. What mattered to the Vandals and the Swordmaidens was that A27 fielded ten formidable exobeasts, each of which massed more than a heavy mech!

While that did not necessarily mean they possessed the combat prowess of a heavy mech, their deadly appearances did not suggest that they grew to such a size because they enjoyed the heavy gravity.

On Aeon Corona VII, growing larger should have been a bad evolutionary path for most species! Those who evolved into larger creatures likely relied on something special to negate the drawbacks of enduring such a heavy gravity, and all of the clues so far pointed to the strange yellow crystalline growths embedded in their foreheads, limbs and other parts of their body!

Some only featured a couple of crystals while other creatures boasted more than a dozen of them! The center-most exobeast and the largest among them carried seventeen lustrous crystals.

"The big guy in the center must be the top dog of this bunch. It's the biggest creature by far and looks like it is keeping the other beasts in line."

"Those crystals serve as both energy reservoirs and antigrav modules." Chief Dakkon confirmed as he poured over the sensor readings directed at the exobeasts. "The crystals are holding a strange form of energy. I can't readily identify it. The antigravity effects they exert is almost identical to the field affected by an obsolete antigrav module. Those crystals are almost certainly designed by humans!"

"Are those crystals grown by the exobeasts or have humans embedded them into their flesh?"

"Implanted." Dr. Tillman stated after a few seconds. "I can see the remnants of crude surgery marks in the scales and hides surrounding the crystals. They've likely been implanted when these exobeasts were young or adolescent. However, I'm not sure how the crystals have grown to such a size. The readings suggests that the crystals have grown in tandem with the exobeasts."

This was the first definite clue that humans interfered with the growth of these exobeasts. For what purpose, though?

"The crystal closest to the rider is constantly emanating a small but concentrated field. It is shielding the riders from the brunt of the planet's gravity."

Well, that was one reason why humans went through the trouble embedding the crystals into the flesh of the exobeasts. Where did those crystals come from, and how had they been synthesized?

Even if Ves experimented with crystals before during his development of his Crystal Lord design, that did not mean he knew what was going on here. Each crystal possessed unique properties in the same way any metal different from each other.

Iron, lead, gold or titanium all fell under the category of metals, but they exhibited dramatically different attributes and applications.

While the experts conferred with each other and shared their observations, Captain Byrd conferred with Captain Clarissa of the Swordmaidens over short-ranged comms.

Both of them recognized that the exobeast riders issued a challenge against the Flagrant Swordmaidens!

Even though culture and language may have diverted over a span of thousands of years, some patterns of behavior remained constant throughout



time. Not just humans, but many sentient alien species valued the concepts of duels.

Duels were basically the most primitive and direct way to establish superiority over others without resorting to a full-scale conflict. The leader or a champion put their life or honor on the line in a duel that would have far-reaching effects in the relations between the two parties.

The fact that the exobeast riders evidently demanded a duel showed even if the inhabitants had been largely uncommunicative towards the visitors, both sides still shared at least one common language!

The language of the biggest fist!

The contention between Captain Byrd and Captain Clarissa grew when they tried to decide how to respond.

Captain Byrd wanted to impress a message of absolute dominance by pitting all eighty of their mechs against the ten formidable exobeasts. Though their combat prowess likely didn't match up to a heavy mechs, besting the natives through overwhelming numbers and firepower would hit home the disparity in power.

Captain Clarissa disagreed, though. Her voice came out loud and clear through the comm channel.

"We know how isolated settlers think and act. The riders who stepped out of the city gates are their leaders and champions. While they are uncertain of our intentions, the fact that they haven't stormed towards us means that there is still a way to gain their respect without walking over their pride. They demand a fair duel, and while it may be risky to send out our mechs to match the exobeasts in a duel, we must match their courage!"

To the Swordmaidens, accepting the challenge was a matter of honor. The Swordmaidens prided themselves on their combat prowess, and each of their

adults survived a graduation ceremony that compelled them to track down and slay a formidable exobeast on their own with nothing but some basic clothes and their swords!

The the Swordmaidens, these giant mech-sized exobeasts harkened back to the glory of forcing themselves to face off against an exobeast in open combat!

Eventually, Clarissa and Byrd agreed to send out one representative each. Captain Byrd gave the honor to Captain Orfan, who enthusiastically accepted the challenge.

"Don't you worry, old bird, I'll kick their scaly asses in a jiffy!" Captain Orfan boasted as she directed her spearman mech forward.

From the Swordmaiden ranks, a fairly typical Devil Razor stepped out from their ranks. This one appeared a little more ornate than most.

In fact, its tribal markings and the skeleton trophies adorning the Devil Razor caused the exobeasts to stamp their limbs and unsettle their exobeast riders. They may not be able to read the Devil Razor's tribal markings, but they recognized a champion when they saw one!

The spearman mech dyed in the same standard burgundy-and-black color scheme of all the other Vandal mechs seemed plain in comparison. Standing side-by-side with the Devil Razor, Captain Orfan's mech looked like a lackey rather than the machine of a mech officer.

Once they stepped at the midpoint about five-hundred meters away from the city walls, two of the exobeasts stepped forward. One of them appeared to be the king among their group while the other seemed to be of a different species.

They lumbered forward fairly quickly, though they appeared slower in every eyes due to their ponderous steps. Soon enough, they moved out of the citywide antigrav field, subjecting their entire bodies to six times the gravity.

The beasts hardly slowed down! The crystals largely remained dormant, with only the crystal closest to their riders emanating an active antigrav field.

"These exobeasts aren't built like runners." Dr. Tillman observed. "However, don't expect them to be slow to respond. Their musculature suggests that they can lunge and snap forward like a crocodile. Tell our duelists to watch out for lunging attacks."

"Every observation you make is being entered into our local database in addition to being shared with the Swordmaidens." Captain Byrd explained.

"Keep up the good work. The more you figure out these exobeasts, the easier we can pull them off their pedestals."

Once the two exobeasts arrived at a certain distance from the two mechs, both sides stared at each other with wariness and anticipation.

The rider of the exobeast king then roused himself up his saddle and started to shout at the mechs. The two mechs at the front captured his voice and transmitted it back to the fast transport.

"You have approached Mulak, a territory of the sacred gods!" The man shouted in accented standard language. This confirmed that the descendants of the crew of the Starlight Megalodon hadn't lost all of their roots. "Hokaz, Tyrant of the Wastes, challenges one of your godless metal giants to sacred combat! If there is any honor among your heretical metal bones, then allow our sacred god to redeem you in battle!"

The reptilian exobeast unleashed a roar to emphasize the words issued by its rider!

"What the hell is a sacred god?" Chief Dakkon asked in puzzlement.

"I think the sacred gods refer to those exobeasts!" Ves supplied a possible response.

These descendants of the CFA actually revered these giant creatures! This was completely upside-down in the eyes of modern humanity. Alien species and beasts should be harnessed for their use, not the other way around! The thought that these seemingly brutish and primitive exobeasts actually ruled over the city sent a shudder through everyone's spines.

"That may not be necessarily true." Dr. Tillman quickly retorted. "Even if your words are factually true, their riders merely pay lip service to better corral the inhabitants of their cities. It is a lot harder to revolt against a heavy mech-sized beast than it is to rebel against a human leader."

Whether the exobeasts or their riders were actually in charge, nobody knew. The fact of the matter was that they were essentially acting as a single entity right now. The combination of an exobeast and its rider was equivalent to a mech and its mech pilot!

Captain Byrd sent an instruction to Captain Orfan. "These natives might not know that our mechs are piloted by humans. Go and pop your body out of your cockpit. They need to see that our so-called godless machines are ridden by humans."

A few seconds later, Captain Orfan and the Swordmaiden mech champion both emerged from their cockpits. They retracted the helmet of their piloting suits and revealed that they were humans just like the riders of the exobeasts!

The exobeasts and their riders reacted with considerable surprise. As expected, they had mistook the mechs for some kind of strange and aberrant giant creatures!

"I am Captain Rosa Orfan of the 6th Flagrant Vandals. On behalf of my mech regiment, I accept your challenge for single combat!"

"Good!" The lead rider laughed. "Then let us see if your godless machines can withstand the might of our sacred gods!"

The four champions didn't exchange a lot words. None of them were interested in talking. All of them acted like combat maniacs about to get their greatest fix!

### Chapter 786 Naeduviv

The Swordmaiden champion called dibs on dueling Hokaz, the Tyrant of the Wastes and presumably the ruler of Mulak, the city the Flagrant Swordmaidens once called A27!

Naturally, Captain Orfan strenuously objected. She wanted to hog the right to duel the formidable-looking Hokaz for herself!

Both Byrd and Clarrissa tried to hash the argument out among themselves.

"Captain Byrd, my champion is not only an experienced duelist, but also a hunter of many varied exobeasts." Captain Clarissa explained. "There are no other beast hunters among our ranks who have hunted down more exobeasts than Lieutenant Dise! While I respect you Vandals on your combat prowess, your forces are predominantly trained to fight against other mechs! Fighting an exobeast is another matter entirely than fighting a mech!"

Eventually, Byrd conceded against Clarissa's logic. She felt no guilt in ordering Captain Orfan to leave the job of dueling the biggest and baddest-looking exobeast to Lieutenant Dise!

"That's not fair!" Orfan complained. "She's just a pirate lieutenant! What gives her the qualifications to hog the big guy for herself! I should be the one to go toe-to-toe against Hokaz!"

Captain Byrd remained undeterred, however. "We know nothing about their species nor their combat prowess. Those embedded crystals possess an astonishing amount of power, and Hokaz exhibits the most of those strange

crystals. Against these unknown species with unknown capabilities, it is best to reserve our best exobeast hunter against their biggest beast. Don't be too upset, Rosa. You have the honor of going first against their second-strongest creature."

Although Captain Orfan replied over the comm with a profanity-laden tirade, Byrd swiftly muted the comm channel as if it was an ingrained reflex. After ten or so seconds, she unmuted the channel again.

"Fine! Just fine! I'll go forward and serve up my mech as your guinea pig, but you better give me first dibs next time!"

The Vandal mech captain jumped back into her cockpit and directed her mech forward in a clear acceptance of the challenge.

Lieutenant Dise entered her own Devil Razor and took a step back to indicate that they agreed to a one-one-one duel.

That served the other side just right. The lead rider looked to the woman who piloted the second-strongest exobeast. They exchanged some words before Hokaz slowly lumbered backwards.

The other exobeast proceeded to hobble forward. While this creature was almost as large as Hokaz, it looked a bit more slender than the Tyrant of the Wastes, though it was also longer from head to tail. Its scales and hide took on a deep dark blue coloring, only to be broken up by a speckled pattern of shiny white scales.

The creature looked like it embodied a star-studded night. Ves wondered if the stranded descendants even knew what night really looked like. With the bright astral winds flowing constantly over their heads, Aeon Corona VII had never once experienced what it was like to be plunged into darkness since the Starlight Megalodon crash-landed onto its surface.

The female rider began to announce herself. "I am Pirisa, Gatekeeper of the River of Souls and chosen of Naeduis, the Life Giver! I hereby challenge you and your sword-wielding machine to a sacred duel! If we win, you godless machine riders must depart from the territory of our god-king!"

Captain Orfan broadcasted her own reply, though she merely parroted Captain Byrd's words whispered into her ears. "I accept your duel! However, are not conquerors who have come to wrest control over your territory. We have no cause to fight to the death! Also, if my machine and I manage to win, you must treat our delegation as friendly guests and promise not to do them harm!"

Pirisa, the rider of Naeduis, spoke something to the rider of Hokaz. The female rider eventually nodded in assent. "Your demands are acceptable! "

"Then it is agreed! We shall fight until one of us surrenders or is put in a position of submission! No one else may intervene in our duel!"

The spearman mech moved forward with its knees slightly bent in order to facilitate a dodge. The mech held out its shortspear in a steady, two-handed grip, and appeared ready to stab it forward whenever Orfan spotted an opportunity.

Naeduis on its part stomped forward in a slow but momentous gait. Just its movements caused a lot of the Vandals and Swordmaidens present to feel intimidated.

Out of respect for their opponents and their own martial traditions, the Vandals and the Swordmaidens sent out a melee mech each.

While the two forces could have sent a nimble rifleman mech to kite these lumbering brutes to a death by a thousand cuts, such a victory would never feel as satisfying as achieving victory on their strongest aspect!

To Ves, all this emphasis on honor and fairness rankled him. Once a conflict led to a dual, it seemed that every mech pilot suddenly lost half of their intelligence! They became as rowdy and competitive as thirteen-year old kids in school!

If he was in charge of the Flagrant Swordmaidens, he would have gone for Captain Byrd's initial suggestion and just stomp all over the natives with their superior numbers and firepower.

Barring that, he would have at least presented the rifleman mechs so that they could grind the lumbering exobeasts while constantly on the move and out of reach.

It shouldn't be a crime to exploit an enemy's fatal flaw!

By now, Orfan's spearman mech reached a typical starting range from Naeduviz. The long and somewhat slender exobeast stared glowering with glowering eyes at what it considered to be a godless machine. A long tongue flickered in and out of its jaws lined with razor-sharp teeth.

The staring match stretched on for a minute before the Pirisa abruptly raised a clenched fist. "Naeduviz, the Life Giver, show these godless machines what a true sacred god can do! I call upon you to draw upon the vault of the gods!"

Inside the fast transport, Ves thought that such an announcement sounded fanciful but without substance, but Chief Dakkon suddenly cried out in alarm.

"The energy levels within the crystals embedded in its hide are being activated somehow! It's stirring something up!"

"Dr. Tillman, what is going on?!" Captain Byrd asked with an apprehensive voice.

"I don't have enough data, ma'am!" The frazzled doctor replied as the wind around Naeduviz started to revolve into some kind of funnel. "The exobeast's



crystals aren't part of its biology. Their functioning falls outside of my expertise!"

Chief Dakkon couldn't say much either. Without studying these crystals extensively in a lab, they only had outside observations to go on, which didn't help them much. After all, the chief never detected that the crystals were capable of whipping up this kind of phenomenon!

On her part, Captain Orfan refrained from attacking, though she would be fully in her right to do so. In her judgement, Naeduviz was starting to wind itself up and accumulate more strength. So long it didn't behave too excessively, Orfan's honor dictated that she should let her opponent do so in order to face it at its strongest!

"Look at the astral winds!" Chief Dakkon called out. "Naeduviz is affecting the higher-dimensional particles somehow!"

Every Vandal and Swordmaiden looked on with their mouths gaped open as an invisible energy tornado formed above the dark blue exobeast. This funnel stretched out so far above the sky that it actually connected to the astral winds flowing turbulently above their heads.

The energy tornado siphoned a small but bright trickle of higher-dimensional particles. The glowing wind circled downwards from the skies until it slammed into the crystals adorning the exobeast.

"The crystals are releasing stronger emissions! The entire beast is being surrounded by a weak energy field as well as an antigrav field along its entire bulk! Heat signatures are also rising! The exobeast itself is siphoning some of the incoming energy!"

The scales of the creature known as Naeduviz started to take on an even deeper and shinier luster that overlapped with the energy field the brightly-glowing crystals had managed to conjure out of nowhere. The sheer amount of

higher-dimensional particles compressed into the crystal interfered with their sensor readings, causing the observers to be unable to figure out exactly what was happening!

Whatever the exobeast just did, it just performed a feat that the technologically-superior Flagrant Swordmaidens had never managed to do, and that was to manipulate the astral winds!

"How can this huge creature draw upon the astral winds?" Captain Byrd asked with astonishment. "Isn't that supposed to be higher-dimensional energy that is off-limits to the material dimensions?"

"The key lies in those crystals, ma'am. I don't know what they are and where they come from, but I bet that all of this is attributed to those amazing objects!"

As Chief Dakkon blabbed on about the value of those embedded crystals, Ves made a startling observation on his own. The sensor readings that he paid attention to started to emit a faint pattern that nonetheless shouldn't ordinarily be possible!

"Captain, our sensors have picked up signs of the equivalent of a man-machine connection between Naeduviss and Pirisa! The beast rider is neurally connected with the exobeast!"

"How?!"

"I don't know, ma'am! I haven't detected any neural interfaces or any other artificial constructs!"

"Is it the crystals?"

"I'm not sure, but the connection is linking their brains together directly!"

Even though Ves wasn't certain about his radical observation, Captain Byrd nonetheless chose to warn Captain Orfan about the possibility.

A beast that fought on instincts was entirely different from a beast that fought under human ingenuity. Such a scarily intelligent opponent would be ten times harder to put down!

Byrd instructed Orfan to make a move. "Don't wait any longer. The energy emissions coming out of Naeduviz surpasses your mech by a factor of ten, and it's rising by the second! Just attack already!"

With a wordless cry, the spearman mech leapt into action. It held out its spear like a lance and thundered forward in a seemingly straight charge. The mech's heavy-duty gravitic backpack strained to keep the mech's entire weights within a human norm, but it drained energy like a sieve, especially during combat!

As the mech thrust out its spear with its entire momentum behind the blow, Naeduviz swiftly moved its forepaw in position to block!

CLANG!

Blocked! Captain Orfan's mech swiftly bounced out of the way in fear of receiving a retaliation. Orfan had taken Dr. Tillman's warning to heart. Still, she released a frustrating grunt when she saw the exobeast suffered no apparent damage at all!

"Tell Captain Orfan that she is doing a good job." Ves spoke. "That piercing blow hasn't managed to pierce the exobeast's hide, but that is only because it is infused with some kind of energy field. That single blow struck off a few percentage points of the energy field's strength, and it's recovering fairly slowly. If Captain Orfan keeps up her aggression, you can overload the energy field!"

She followed his advice and began to make a series of hit-and-run attacks. She gave up on maximizing the strength of the blows in an attempt to pierce through the exobeast's unnaturally hardened scales and instead attempted to

treat it like an energy screen. Any energy screen could be overloaded once its capacity of damage surpassed a certain point!

The fundamental differences between a mech and an exobeast came into play. Under the influence of its gravitic backpack, the spearman mech smartly darted in and out, attacking just enough to land a few quick blows before pulling back.

Naeduvīs released an angry as it lunged in an attempt to swat the offending mech. At some points, its antigrav field pulsed as the weight of the entire exobeast suddenly lit up, allowing it to leap forward as if it was unwinding a spring!

Prepared for such an eventuality, Captain Orfan danced her mech to the side within the blink of an eye. Her mech possessed a definite advantage in mobility and she wasn't hesitant in leveraging it in her duel against this heavy mech-like creature!

### **Chapter 787 Might of the Gods**

In her duel against Naeduvīs, Captain Orfan adopted an approach that mech pilots typically employed against heavy mechs.

While a heavy mech possessed enough power to crunch a medium mech in a single, powerful blow, the crucial requirement was that they needed to land a blow in the first place!

Laymen often thought that heavy mechs were ordinarily strong due to their incredible amount of armor and offensive power. Certainly, their high production and maintenance costs suggested that they sat at the top of the totem pole.

The truth was a lot more nuanced than that. Heavy mechs can be employed to devastating effects, but only when directed in a strategically advantageous situation.

Employing heavy mechs was like making a leveraged bet. If a commander managed to put them in a good position where they could employ their strengths to their maximum, then they won big.

However, if their opponents exploited their fatal flaw of low mobility, then the heavy mechs risked taken out with far too much ease, thereby wasting the expensive machines!

Therefore, most of the times, the military forces that could afford to field heavy mechs typically opted to employ them in ranged combat. It was safer and more convenient to keep the heavy mechs back as a strategic weapon platform that could output a lot of firepower from a protected position.

Heavy mechs generally made for very poor duelists, especially if they lacked any form of ranged retaliation.

Only heavy knight mechs saw regular use. Their formidable defenses made up for their lackluster offense and their heavy shields allowed them to act as mobile shields for more vulnerable mechs.

However, this did not apply to the current duel. While Naeduvīs boasted a defense that enveloped its hide and even its beast rider from any external sources of damage, its enhancements did little to speed its body up!

Even as the fifteen crystals emitted more energy and enveloped the exobeast's body in a powerful antigrav field that lessened the effects of gravity upon it, Naeduvīs simply couldn't escape the consequences of its bulk!

"It's a pipe dream for that exobeast to match the mobility of a medium mech that is optimized for melee combat." Ves confidently stated. "The mass of that creature is seven or eight times the mass of Captain Orfan's mech. That's almost an order of magnitude apart. So long as Naeduvīs doesn't possess a form of ranged attack, the odds are low it can turn around its predicament."

Perhaps their low mobility didn't matter as much if they dueled against the other lumbering exobeasts. While the ten exobeasts that stepped outside of the city all differed in size and mass, even the smallest among them still fell within the weight class of a heavy mech.

In addition, most of the other exobeasts hadn't been embedded as much crystals as Hokaz and Naeduviz. The natives had definitely put out their strongest two exobeasts.

"You annoying gnat!" Pirisa shouted as she remained strapped into her saddle. The beast rider didn't worry about being struck by Captain Orfan's spear at all as the protective energy field extended to her body. "Naeduviz, summon your might and show these godless interlopers the might of your godhood! Summon the waters of life!"

Naeduviz stopped its tactic of trying to swipe the darting spearman mech with its maw or limb. Instead, it focused its attention on something entirely different. A low thrum escaped from its throat as the dark blue luster of its scales started to shine even brighter!

"Energy levels are rising!"

"Press the attack! The beast is a sitting duck!"

"Seismic sensors are detecting irregularities! We're detecting something massive approaching underground! It's covering a massive range!"

"The other nine exobeasts are plodding backwards as fast as possible!"

"Withdraw this transport and every mech by at least three-hundred meters!"

A huge surge of water sprung from the previously arid soil! Though they didn't surge up with too much pressure, the sheer scope of the area meant that Naeduviz managed to lift up so much water that it could fill entire mech arena!

"The water is being held aloft by a different energy field! It's not very concentrated, but it is extremely wide-spread!"

Naeduviz roared in exaltation as it summoned a small lake's worth of water from an underground source! Pirisa chopped her hand towards her opponent.

"Naeduviz, show them your godly might! Life Cutter!"

A portion of water slowly began compressing into large water balls half the size of mechs. Then those water balls began to compress into flat circular saws.

Those ominous-looking saws then launched towards Captain Orfan's mech with the speed of a thrown weapon!

Ves issued out a warning. "Tell the captain to avoid those water saws at all costs! A single hit can cut through all of the armor layers of her mech!"

The spinning water saws that Naeduviz launched towards the spearman mech boxed in its target, leaving it with no possible angle to escape any damage. Captain Orfan gritted her teeth and decided to risk a blow to her frontal chest which boasted the thickest armor in exchange for dodging every other projectile.

Crack!

An awful sound occurred on impact! The spearman mech jerked back with an awful horizontal gash in its chest armor. It had mostly held up against the water saw, but it had lost all but one of the layers of armor plating adorning its chest!

If the water saw had struck somewhere less protected such as the arms or the rear armor, then the mech would have suffered a crippling hit!

As of now, the spearman mech really couldn't afford a second impact on the same area.

"The exobeast is expending a large amount of energy every second it keeps up this party trick." Chief Dakkon reported. "Calling upon and lifting up all of this water may look impressive, but nothing comes for free. Naeduvīs won't be able to sustain this for long, especially if it tries to compress another set of water saws."

Pirisa screamed in satisfaction. "Hah! You metal cowards can be hurt! Naeduvīs! Strike the godless machine again! Let us see whether it can bleed! Life Cutter!"

Another salvo of water saws launched into the spearman mech's direction. Having made the mistake of underestimating the water saws before, Captain Orfan grew wiser than before and already dodged away well before the water saws launched.

All of the deadly water saws missed! Captain Orfan leveraged her mech's superior mobility to maximum effect!

"Tell Captain Orfan to keep evading." Chief Dakkon suggested. "Attacking the exobeast removes a lot less energy from the beast than all of the water it is levitating. Her mech can simply keep dodging and wait for the beast to tire itself out!"

Once Naeduvīs launched the third volley of water saws, Pirisa recognized that the Life Cutter attack wouldn't be enough to pin down this annoyingly agile opponent.

Her god needed a way to hamper this mech's mobility!

"Naeduvīs, block the path of this swift and cowardly prey! Wall of Smothering Death!"

Huge sections of floating water started to form into walls that placed itself right in the spearman mech's path. Captain Orfan had to abort her original direction and force her mech to veer to the side, only to encounter another water wall!



The water walls quickly boxed the spearman mech in and attempted to close the machine into a box!

Ves found the entire display to be fascinating, especially since Ves felt a constant tingling from his sixth sense. The form of energy and control the exobeasts employed didn't appear to be spiritual energy, but some other form of energy that possessed some relations to it. "The water walls won't work. The mech and every aspect of it is waterproof, and it possesses enough strength to overcome the loose water pressure of the walls.

The trapped spearman mech realized that it couldn't escape cleanly, so Captain Orfan just decided to break through the envelopment through brute force.

The spearman mech succeeded! Despite the unsettling nature of the direction water walls, they didn't appear to possess any notable strength. Naeduvius appeared to be unable to compress so many large water walls into something more formidable.

Pirisa appeared a bit flustered at the abject failure. It was as if she expected the mech to short out or drown when surrounded by so much water.

Ves chuckled under his breath. "If a mech can be defeated by a splash of water, they're practically useless during the rain."

Although it still wouldn't be a good idea for a mech to stay submerged under an extended amount of time, a brief dive into a body of water wouldn't do any harm. Energetic mechs even sought out any large surfaces of water because they conducted heat away with a lot more efficiency than through air or through the soles of their feet!

A spearman mech didn't generate too much heat, so Captain Orfan hardly paid attention to such a potential boon. Instead, she tried to figure out a way to end this battle faster before the exobeast pulled another trick out of its hat.

"C'mon you eggheads, tell me how to kick this water magician's butt!"

Nobody came up with any better suggestions. The energy field that continued to envelop the exobeast was truly all-encompassing. In fact, if not for their clearly living nature, some of the Vandals might have even mistook Naeduviz for an expert mech!

Of course, even if the exobeast could summon some of the powers of an expert mech, it didn't mean they gained the same combat effectiveness of one.

Having gone mad from her failures, Pirisa urged Naeduviz to shape the water into other shapes before attacking Captain Orfan's mechs.

Water trees, water whips, water beasts and more all attempted to tackle the spearman mech in their own ways, but each time the mech either avoided them or broke them apart with a strong sweep of the spear.

Four minutes went on while this energy-draining charade continued. The energy levels of the crystals steadily dropped, and Naeduviz exhibited clear signs of exhaustion.

At some point, the crystals had grown dull. The exobeast stopped exerting its control over the elevated mass of water. The fluids immediately filtered through the arid soil and disappeared deep underground where it ultimately belonged to. The exobeast lost the energy to employ its water any further!

Captain Orfan's spearman mech stopped a fair distance away from the exhausted Naeduviz. It pointed its spear at the creature in a provocative gesture. "Is that all your water beast has got? I can take more! Show me your best attacks!"

Unfortunately, Naeduviz appeared to be unable to muster any further attacks. It didn't summon another energy tornado either, so it seemed that siphoning ability possessed some kind of limits as well.

"Naeduvīs has lost interest in this little spar." Pirisa slowly said as she pulled her mind out of the wireless man-beast connection she maintained with the sacred god. "She has judged your strength to be worthy of acknowledgement."

"Pffff!"

Fortunately for everyone, Captain Orfan didn't express anything else than a disdainful snort. She had won the duel, but her animal opponent made it sound as if it did the mech captain a favor.

The Vandals ultimately accepted Pirisa's face-saving excuse and allowed Naeduvīs to withdraw with some of its honor intact. Both sides knew that Naeduvīs had actually lost fairly barely. Captain Orfan's mech only received a couple of heavy blows from the water saws and some of the more creative forms of water manipulation, but her mech could keep fighting even after accumulating so much serious damage!

The first duel ultimately served to reveal each other's battle capabilities. Both the visitors and the defenders learned a lot from the duel. It didn't really matter if neither side went for the kill, as they valued the information they obtained over the outcome.

If the initial duel was an appetizer, the second duel was the main course.

Hokaz, the Tyrant of the Wastes, crawled forward and released a majestic cry.

"Lieutenant Dise! You're up!"

#### **Chapter 788 Tyrant of the Wastes**

Though Naeduvīs and Pirisa lost the duel against Captain Orfan with little recourse for doubt, the so-called sacred god's power impressed all of the Flagrant Swordmaidens.

Dr. Tillman and Chief Dakkon poured over the voluminous amount of sensor readings their mechs and transport had captured, but they were no closer to

explaining the phenomenon than before. What Naeduvīs had accomplished was impressive and could easily be placed on par with some of the stronger sentient alien races that humanity had fought!

Both of them made some important observations.

"The crystals embedded into their hides haven't started off at those sizes. They initially started off much smaller, but grew in size along with the slow growth of the exobeasts. I'm not sure how long it takes for this species to reach maturity, but it must be hundreds of years. They never really stop growing either."

"The crystals act as both energy siphons and energy reservoirs. While they aren't capable of storing energy for the long-term, it is remarkable that they are able to absorb the higher-dimensional energy. However, it is the exobeast itself that is responsible for digesting and transforming the higher-dimensional energy into a more malleable form that it used to manipulate all of that water."

"The manipulation process isn't very exact. Naeduvīs possesses a very wide range but its application of its power is like a child wielding a sledgehammer. Turning those water balls into water saws took a noticeably long time."

"I think that the creature only managed to work the finer applications of its powers with the help of its beast rider." Ves added. "The connection that Pirisa shares with Naeduvīs is akin to a mech pilot interfacing with a mech through a wireless interface. I'm not sure whether this connection is accomplished through natural or artificial means, but it is likely the latter considering how similar the readings are. I've even detected echoes of resonance. If I'm right, then Pirisa and all the other beast riders are expert candidates!"

Expert candidates! What did that mean? It meant that this city of an estimated 100,000 inhabitants or more somehow produced potential expert pilots at a rate of at least 1 to 10,000 people!

This was an insanely high proportion! If a state like the Bright Republic boasted such a conversion ratio, then they'd be able to field a million expert candidates!

Even if only ten percent of those candidates eventually advanced to expert pilots, that still amounted to 100,000 devastatingly skilled mech pilots who could sweep through all of the surrounding star sectors!

"Is that true?" Captain Byrd frowned. Perhaps they should have brought Venerable Xie on a spare mech after all. "Are you absolutely certain that they are expert candidates?"

Ves looked at the exobeasts in the distance and tried to feel out their spirituality. Sadly, the fast transport stood too far away, and the interference in the air didn't help much either.

"It's only a hypothesis, ma'am." He cautioned. "It is a potential explanation for how the exobeast and its beast rider is able to perform some of these resonance-like powers. The best way to look at their union is to regard them as a hybrid between a heavy mech and an expert mech. They're neither one or the other, but exhibit traits of both."

That caused every Vandal in the fast transport to grimace.

"Naeduvīs lost against our mech because they have likely never fought against an opponent this fast and quick on its feet." Dr. Tillman explained her thoughts. "Looking at the lineup of exobeasts leads me to believe that all of the combat-capable members of its species exhibit like slow, heavy mech-like builds. Their combat methods may look powerful but clumsy to us, but against

other exobeasts that are slow like them, their combat methods are considerably effective."

Ves added to that conclusion. "The widespread water manipulation and the slow windup of its attacks lend Naeduviz well to a role akin to an artillery mech. It's not only able to bombard exobeasts from range, its water manipulation can also hinder or even drown large hordes of smaller beasts or other natives on foot."

"From the title that Naeduviz has received, I think its role as a source of water is of even greater importance to the city of Mulak than its battle capabilities. There is no river in the vicinity and it's fairly hard to sustain a settlement of this size without a water source. However, if Naeduviz can summon up a large amount of water that can quench the thirst of all of the city's inhabitants as well as its farms, then it has definitely earned the title of Life Giver!"

"It's no wonder the natives worship them as sacred gods. It is not an empty title."

"Do you think that they are sentient?" Ves suddenly asked.

This caused every analyst to fall silent. Dr. Tillman shook her head, but she didn't seem confident. "Ordinarily, I would say no. Giant exobeasts with these particular traits throughout the galaxy typically don't evolve into intelligent species. However, I can't rule out the possibility of genetic modification performed in the past, nor am I able to account for the consequences of an exobeast interfacing with a human mind. It may be possible for a wild exobeast to gain some measure of self-awareness from frequent contact with a human mind. We know that mech pilots sometimes gains a measure of machine-like thinking from piloting mechs."

This phenomenon was well-known to both mech pilots and mech designers. Both of them looked at the slow transformation of a mech pilot's mind and neural system as the principal advancement process of their profession.

Those with a higher degree of genetic aptitude possessed more malleable minds, and therefore adjusted better to the conditions required to deepen their connections with mechs. Such a transformation eventually culminated into metamorphosis into experts which went beyond the understanding of human science.

"In other words, the connection can go both ways." Ves threw out. "In a theoretical man-beast connection, the beast in question is able to acquire some of the traits of human intelligence, while the man it is partnered with may have adopted some of the animal instincts that drive the beasts."

This possibility definitely discomfited Captain Byrd. If the beast riders who claimed to speak for the sacred gods had taken on some animalistic traits, then she would need to adopt a different approach to build up friendly relations.

"Hokaz is stepping up!"

The Flagrant Vandals and Lydia's Swordmaidens weren't the only ones to confer among themselves. The other side had learned a lot of lessons as well, and each of the ten exobeasts had huddled together in a crowded circle so that their beast riders could discuss among themselves.

Strangely enough, the exobeasts participated in the discussion themselves with their roars. Naeduvīs in particular released a lot of aggrieved-sounding roars.

The fast transports deployed miniature listening bugs in an attempt to eavesdrop on their conversation, but the bugs suddenly shorted out when they came within several hundred meters to the formidable beasts.

The Vandals had more success with reading their lips from afar, but they only managed to pick up a fraction of the discussion.

It didn't matter. Right now, Lieutenant Dise in her Devil Razor was about to face the king of the gods in single combat!

The massive, bulky gait of Hokaz lumbered forward with incredible majesty. While it was a little shorter than Naeduviz, it possessed a lot more body mass appeared to be a nightmare to face in melee range. Different from its mate, Hokaz was covered in thicker scaled of striped yellow coloration.

If Naeduviz resembled a sea creature on land, then Hokaz exhibited the majesty of a tiger in lizard form!

Its strong limbs must be strong enough to demolish a section of the city wall in a couple of blows!

Its male beast rider with a long mane of wild blond hair began to announce himself. "You have the honor of facing Hokaz, the Tyrant of the Wastes! I am Karawin, the Lord of Grey and the chosen of Hokaz. You will find this sacred god to be a worthier opponent than its mate!"

Karawin's words suggested that the exobeasts consisted of a pack.

"Some of the smaller exobeasts among their ranks share a number of traits with Hokaz and Naeduviz." Dr. Tillman said. "If they are a breeding pair, then at least half of their ranks are part of their family. I don't believe the rest of the exobeasts share any familiar relations, though. They are of entirely different breeds."

The Devil Razor broadcasted back its own announcement. "I am Lieutenant Dise, Swordmaiden and mech champion in the service of Commander Lydia! I have hunted over a hundred exobeasts on more than twenty planets!"



Both sides weren't interested in exchanging smack talk. Once they finished with their exchange, Hokaz immediately called up an energy tornado.

The sight of a narrow funnel reaching all the way up to the so-called vault of the gods and siphon away some of the astral winds impressed all of the visitors. Now that they knew what to look for, every applicable scanner had been employed in recording the phenomenon.

As a chivalrous Swordmaiden, Lieutenant Dise let the Tyrant of the Wastes gather its strength without interruption. Her swordsman mech held out its razor-like sword in an offensive posture. With how strong Hokaz appeared to be, she would be a fool to think that her Devil Razor would be able to block any of the sacred god's blows.

After a couple of minutes, all seventeen crystals embedded at various spots along the exobeast's body glowed as bright as the stars! Hokaz let loose a thunderous war cry that immediately released a ball of crackling electric fury!

"Dodge!"

Fortunately, Lieutenant Dise steered her mech away, jumping to the side well before the ball passed her former location.

The exobeast's glowing eyes narrowed at the mech as it began to build up speed. The creature took a deep breath and released another destructive electric ball! However, hitting a moving mech was easier said than done. The ball possessed no tracking abilities and harmlessly passed by the swordsman mech.

The Devil Razor even circled around to the rear of the lumbering exobeast and struck a handful of blows before pulling back! The mech had retreated just in time as well, because the tail had just started whipping its former position!

A repeat of the previous duel took place. Lieutenant Dise may have been honorable enough to allow Hokaz to charge up its energy, but she wasn't hesitant about exploiting its brutal deficiency in speed and reaction time.

Karawin, who rode atop the increasingly frustrated sacred god, narrowed his eyes. "Are all of your godless machines so annoying to fight against? No matter! Let me show you the reason why Hokaz is the Tyrant of the Wastes! Come, my old partner! Unleash the fury of the vault of heavens upon these lifeless automatons!"

Hokaz abruptly roared into the sky. Amazingly, the sky roared back! For some reason, the astral winds high above the skies developed into an incredibly turbulent pattern that threw the sensors of the fast transport into whack.

The turbulent astral winds suddenly unleashed a thunderstorm in a wide area around the dueling site! Some of them even came close to hitting the spectating exobeasts and mechs, forcing them to back off even further!

The abnormal lightning bolts that rained down from the vault of the gods didn't appear like regular lightning bolts! The bright yellow bolts rained down in such frequency that many of the Vandals and Swordmaidens had trouble peering through the brightness even as they wore vision-compensating visors.

As for the Devil Razor in the middle of the storm, the lightning bolts falling in its vicinity behaved as if they were attracted to the metal machine, instantly diverting in order to strike the machine!

The mech managed to continue to function after being struck a couple of times, but by the time it suffered a dozen different strikes, the machine quickly started to smoke and jitter!

As the lightning strikes continued to bombard the hapless mech and a wide area around it, a sense of horror grew among the Flagrant Swordmaidens. If

those storms managed to hit their camp, then it would immediately wipe out almost all of them, mechs not excepted!

The abnormal, supercharged lightning bolts cut off every single connection and threw every sensor into confusion. Despite the lack of sensor readings, Ves could see as plain as day that the Devil Razor's inbuilt electrical resistance had quickly reached the limits of its capacity.

Lieutenant Dise risked being fried to a crisp if this rain of lightning continued to persist!

"Call off the duel!" He shouted over the thunder and lightning! "Tell the Swordmaidens to concede before Lieutenant Dise loses her life!"

"We can't! We lost our communications to the Swordmaiden transport and mechs!"

#### **Chapter 789 Power Parity**

The Devil Razor in the middle of the lightning storm practically lost control as soon as more than a handful lightning bolts struck the machine in quick succession.

Ves knew that landbound mechs generally incorporated a decent amount of shielding against lightning attacks and EMP effects. They wouldn't croak the second they walked out in a regular thunderstorm and got hit by a few lightning strikes because the metallic machines essentially stood out like giant lightning rods.

Yet any safety system possessed a hard limit. The lightning storm raining down from the vault of the gods already exhibited an intensity that surpassed the buffers of a regular mech like the Devil Razor!

"These aren't regular lightning bolts!"

"The safeties built around the cockpit won't be able to last much longer!"

At some point, the Devil Razor lost control over its movement to such an extent that it lost its grip on its weapon. Its knees also lost stability, causing the mech to keep over on the flat of its back!

Ves winced as the weight of the swordman mech crushed the gravitic backpack with its weight. The backpack had already succumbed to the lightning strikes, causing the antigrav field it emitted to stop compensating for the Devil Razor's weight. This merely amplified the damage and caused the backpack to sustain so much fall and crush damage that its exterior broke and spilled out components everywhere!

Fortunately, Hokaz ceased to channel the massive lightning storm. With a victorious cry, it dispersed the storm and ended the lightning rain!

The victorious exobeast looked more majestic than ever as it raised its head in a proud angle. Its embedded crystals lost more than half of their glow, which indicated that the lightning storm attack had taken a lot out of the sacred god.

Still, this attack alone more than proved Hokaz's chops as the Tyrant of the Wastes! The exobeast unleashed so many empowered lightning bolts that they could ruin an entire mech regiment if it approached in a tight formation!

The only consolation to the Flagrant Swordmaidens was that the energy-draining attack likely didn't span more than a square kilometer at most.

If they ever fell into hostilities with the city of Mulak, then the Vandals and the Swordmaidens may be able to grind the defenders down by employing a dispersed formation adopting hit-and-run attacks.

"It took some time for the lightning storm to rain down." Chief Dakkon said. "Hokaz also hasn't shown any capability of exerting fine control over the storm. It definitely isn't able to avoid hitting its own allies."

That still left the Flagrant Swordmaidens with a lot of limitations in terms of possible tactics they could employ to defeat the exobeasts in a full-blown battle. It definitely wouldn't be a victory without sacrifices as they initially thought.

Savages they may be, their ingenious man-beast connection enabled these natives to exert strength akin to a mature expert mech!

As the storm receded and Hokaz wound down from its battle mode with a satisfied bestial grin, Ves refocused the sensors of the fast transport to the beast, paying particular attention to the sensors that measured resonance.

"The connection between Hokaz and Karawin is a lot stronger than the one between Naeduviz and Pirisa!" Ves reported with a growing sense of amazement. "If these readings are correct.. then the connection between the exobeast king and its beast rider has reached the expert level! It's strong enough to exhibit a similar degree of resonance to a genuine expert mech!"

Captain Byrd looked both amazed and horrified at the news. "What are you saying, Mr. Larkinson?!"

"Captain, I'm saying that Karawin is what passes for an expert pilot among their ranks and that Hokaz is his biological expert mech! No, in fact it surpasses normal conventions among expert pilots and their expert mechs! Hokaz is able to leverage as much power as an ace mech!"

Ace mech! That was one degree higher than an expert mech! If society regarded expert pilots as demigods, then ace pilots earned the distinction of half gods due to the destructive degree of resonance they could call upon!

"Will we need to regard Hokaz as an ace mech?"

"Not quite." Ves quickly tried to reassure the horrified Vandals. "All I'm saying is that while Hokaz exhibited power that has reached the threshold of an ace mech, it doesn't appear to have the control or the endurance to sustain this

level of strength. I doubt that Karawin is as strong as an ace pilot. I think this is a case similar to how an expert pilot entering the cockpit of an ace mech. The expert pilot can't sustain the load of piloting such a powerful machine."

The theory that Ves spouted gave the Vandals a better perspective in the power dynamic between the beast riders and their exobeast partners. Dr. Tillman had already estimated the ages creatures like Hokaz and Naeduviz at several centuries old, with the exobeast king exceeding the second-oldest by a margin of at least two-hundred years!

To Ves, this realization fascinated him to no end, because he believed this man-beast connection may be one of the directions his design philosophy developed towards!

Was it not his desire to design mechs akin to these exobeasts? The thought of building mechs that lived and thought like these sacred gods and actively added their own prowess to the man-machine connection stimulated Ves to no end!

He needed to research the details of this man-beast connection!

He wanted so badly to storm off to Hokaz and bend down in worship to this awesome sacred god! This supremely majestic creature was like an organically grown ace mech, one that truly stood as an equal or even superior to their beast rider!

The quick and devastating victory achieved by Hokaz and Karawin put the score at 1 to 1. This wiped out Captain Orfan's gains and put both sides back to square one in terms of commitments.

If the Flagrant Swordmaidens and the defenders of Mulak wanted to force an outcome to this contest, then they had to fight a third duel.

Captain Byrd already conferred with Captain Clarissa of the Swordmaidens. If they needed to fight another duel, then Byrd insisted on deploying a rifleman mech.

Screw honor and fairness! If the natives rolled out the equivalent of an expert mech to one of the duels, then the Vandals would be just as shameless and teach these savages the despair of battling against a mech that peppered them with lasers at a distance of ten kilometers or more!

A laser rifleman mech would have no trouble hitting a target from this distance, especially when it employed its magnification and targeting systems. An exobeast and its rider on the other hand may not even have the means to retaliate that far!

"Hokaz is definitely the strongest sacred god among their ranks." Ves described their situation. "The rest of the exobeasts don't look nearly as formidable as their king. As long as the third exobeast is as slow as the rest and lacks a ridiculous ranged attack like the one employed by Hokaz, a third duel will certainly be an easy win for us."

However, the other side appeared to be unwilling to fight any further duels. Hokaz let out a couple of commanding roars, causing Karawin to issue out some quiet instructions to his fellow beast riders.

The natives continued to look at the Flagrant Swordmaidens with wary expressions. Hokaz may have kicked the butt of Lieutenant Dise's Devil Razor, but the visitors brought many more mechs. Half of them had already shown off their long-ranged laser capabilities when they burned a hole through their thick alloy city walls.

Captain Byrd ordered one of their rifleman mechs to step forward from the ranks. This unspoken message caused the native beast riders to intensify their discussion.

"Why did you reveal our next duelist, ma'am?" Ves asked.

"I can tell that they are hesitating. It takes a lot of effort for the exobeasts to fight a duel, and even Hokaz looks like it has spent half its fuel tank to summon up the lightning storm. I think they are worried that we are attempting to exhaust their sacred gods one by one. Now that I have signalled that our side is willing to send out a ranged mech, they should feel a lot less confident about achieving victory. Maintaining parity with us should prove more attractive than risking another loss, especially since they already sent out their two strongest exobeasts."

"Won't we gain an advantage if we win two out of three duels, ma'am?"

"Not necessarily." The older mech captain shook her head. "We'll only rub our superiority in their faces, but these natives look too proud to tolerate such indignity for long. If we want to establish truly friendly ties with this faction, then we need them to see us as strong but equal partners."

If the Flagrant Swordmaidens stuck around for months and years, then they would have time to work away the resentment the locals had accumulated from suffering a loss.

Yet according to their schedule, the ground forces would only be sticking around for two weeks at most. The visitors from the stars wouldn't be interacting with the inhabitants of Mulak on anything more than a superficial basis. Captain Clarissa managed to convince Captain Byrd that the natives would be more favorably disposed to the visitors if the Flagrant Swordmaidens didn't trample upon their pride.

"How would you feel if a complete stranger knocks at your door out of the blue and insists on barging into your home?" Captain Clarissa asked. "Then suppose the stranger proceeds to punch you in the face while threatening to



be let inside. You'd never feel good about your new guest because if he can punch you once, he can punch you again."

The natives had come to a decision. They had fallen for the manipulations directed against them as they put down their hostile attitude!

A smaller exobeasts stepped forward and its younger beast rider began to announce their decision. "Hokaz, the Tyrant of the Wastes, the god-king of Mulak, the one who possesses the key to the vault of the gods, respects your battle prowess. In his infinite wisdom, our wisest sacred god has decided to be generous enough to extend Mulak's hospitality to those who claim to have come from beyond the vault of the gods! We permit entry to no more than ten humans!"

The natives attached a few more conditions and assurances to the Flagrant Swordmaidens. They promised not to harm the visitors granted entry into their city as long as they didn't do anything outrageous. The Flagrant Swordmaidens in turn needed to pull their mechs out of sight to the city, and weren't allowed to bring any of their 'godless machines' into the city.

Though risky, Captain Clarissa thought this was the best offer that the natives could stomach at the moment. "Insisting on bringing in a mech is not wise. It is a challenge to their exobeasts and may serve as a potential destabilizing factor in their rule over the city."

Captain Byrd did not seem so reassured, but she was willing to defer to the Swordmaidens as they possessed a lot more experience in interacting with isolated settlers in the frontier.

Eventually, the Vandals and the Swordmaidens each presented five representatives. Captain Byrd chose to bring Chief Dakkon, Dr. Tillman, Ves and Captain Orfan.

Byrd hesitated over the last addition. Without Orfan's presence, the mech company that remained behind lacked a strong leader and champion to take charge in case of emergencies.

However, Captain Orfan managed to win a clean victory in her duel against Naeduviz and its beast rider Pirisa. As the victor of the first duel, Captain Orfan probably earned the respect of the natives, and bringing her along would help break the ice.

The Swordmaidens brought forth their own gaggle of experts and mech pilots, including a lightly-injured Lieutenant Dise.

Compared to the plain and functional suits of armor worn by the Vandals, the five Swordmaidens that stepped forward came in full pirate regalia. They all appeared ready to intimidate or chop up every obstacle in their way!

#### **Chapter 790 Sacred Tour Guide**

Once the Flagrant Swordmaidens agreed to the invitation, nine of the exobeasts along with their beast riders plodded back into Mulak. The city gates winched open, allowing the large creatures with Hokaz at the lead to return to their seat of power.

Naeduviz and Pirisa stayed behind to accompany the two groups of five sent out by the Vandals and the Swordmaidens.

All of them grew more apprehensive as they approached the huge and tall exobeast. Its dark blue coloring had faded a little after the duel, but the creature still radiated a sense of formless pressure around its old and terribly powerful body.

Pirisa glanced at the armored forms of the visitors in fascination, paying a lot more attention to the Swordmaidens who adorned their armor with tribal trappings. Pirisa for her part wore a simple dress made out of woven fabric

and decorated her appearance with various metal jewelry including an exquisitely crafted circlet over her head.

The beast rider for her part looked beautiful and acted like a queen. Her mixed heritage had given her a rich brown skin and her silky black hair had been put up in an elaborate bun that enhanced her stature.

"I am Pirisa, the Gatekeeper of the River of Souls. As a chosen of Naeduviz, we govern the life and death of every subject in Mulak. Within our domain, you must remember that you live at the pleasure of our sacred gods. If you offend Hokaz or Naeduviz, then nothing will save you from their wrath despite any assurances that we have made. Therefore, do not offend the dignity of our sacred gods!"

"We understand." Captain Clarissa replied smoothly. "We respect the sovereignty and dignity of your sacred gods, though please forgive us for worshipping other entities. We are strangers to these lands and your gods. Would you please provide us with an introduction?"

Naeduviz suddenly released a low roar. The low sound waves shook the ground and caused the Vandals and Swordmaidens to feel as if they ran through a malfunctioning sonic shower.

"Naeduviz is pleased with your interest! She is happy to allow me to regale you with the majesty of our pantheon!" Pirisa perked up.

Whether she understood the intentions of her exobeast through her roars or through an ongoing man-beast connection, nobody knew. Ves didn't exactly have a scanner active right now.

Considering the fate of every spy drone the Vandals attempted to send near the beasts or into the city, these natives didn't seem as helpless against advanced technology as everyone had initially thought. Activating any devices might get picked up by the scary creature who handily outmassed a heavy

mech. Ves did not want to find out what would happen if one of its limbs stomped down on his head.

"Let me start with the beginning." The beast rider said as they slowly walked towards the western gate of the city. Naeduviz turned out to be surprisingly thoughtful and matched its pace to the visitors on foot. "Mulak is an ancient city that was founded by our ancestors in a time before our sacred gods descended from the vault of the gods. It is the center of these wastes and home to several ancient treasures. Many gods and men covet what we have claimed for ourselves, but none have fought against our sacred gods and won!"

The group hardly made any progress towards the city gates. They probably could have reached it by now if the visitors stepped on top of Naeduviz, but the sacred god probably didn't appreciate being ridden by strangers.

"Hokaz is not the first sacred god who has ruled these wastes. Many cycles before the time of my birth, our majestic god-king has challenged the sacred god who used to claim these lands! He easily won against the old and decrepit god, claiming all of the fallen's god crystals as his spoils! After driving off the weak sacred gods that have pledged to serve old god, Hokaz has claimed the title of Tyrant of the Wastes and attracted other sacred gods under his godly domain."

The way Pirisa referred to the exobeasts as gods left little doubt of her belief in their divinity. She sounded genuinely respectful of them as entities beyond the reach of mortals!

Ves still couldn't figure out if the exobeasts like Hokaz or Naeduviz called the shots or not. Were they actually sentient to the point where they exerted total control over the city and the surrounding lands?

The Flagrant Swordmaidens preferred to believe that the beast riders only claimed to speak on behalf of the sacred gods, using their influence over the exobeasts as badges of authority. Such an alternative sounded a lot more reassuring than dealing with thinking exobeasts that exhibited the intelligence of humans but remained affected by the instincts of beasts!

"Naeduvīs here pledged allegiance to Hokaz first after he bested her in ritual combat! Impressed with her godly powers, Hokaz also claimed Naeduvīs as his mate more than ten cycles ago. Since then, Hokaz has ruled the wastes as its god-king while Naeduvīs rules over the ancient city of Mulak as its god-matriarch! So has our pantheon thrived from then. The sacred union of Hokaz and Naeduvīs has blessed us with three godly offspring, while five more gods have acknowledged Hokaz as their king and ruler!"

"How long is a cycle?" Captain Orfan asked. She hadn't quite bought into the entire tale.

To her, the exobeasts were anything but gods. They were merely overgrown lizards or creatures with a few extra tricks up their sleeves. Once the Flagrant Swordmaidens figured out how they performed their metaphysical abilities, she had nothing to fear from these giant animals.

"A cycle is a cycle. I cannot explain to you what a cycle is. All I can say that I have lived for four-and-a-half cycles."

"A cycle is probably a local year." Ves concluded and performed a quick calculation in his mind. "One year on Aeon Corona VII lasts for 3249 days. That's almost nine standard years. Therefore, Pirisa is thirty-five years old!"

The woman in question frowned at their use of unfamiliar terminology. She looked a little older than thirty-five years old actually, but the Vandals and Swordmaidens chalked it up to their harsher living conditions.

Pirisa picked up her story again. "These lands may seem desolate and devoid of life, but the ancient city has managed to stand aloft due to its many treasures. The coming of Naeduviz has invigorated Mulak and restored it to its prime! As the Life Giver, Naeduviz has generously enriched the city she rules over with the bounty of her godly powers. While our sacred god has taken plenty of life, she is primarily known for giving them to our grateful subjects."

Seeing that Pirisa acted amiable enough to answer questions, Captain Byrd tried to encourage their friendly exchange by asking another question.

"Naeduviz provides Mulak with access to water?"

"Mulak has always been able to provide for its people, but only for a portion." The beast rider corrected. "Once Naeduviz lent her power, none of our subjects lack for water or food. Our surplus is the envy of these lands, as we are able to feed the appetite of ten sacred gods!"

It sounded like Hokaz was the warrior who kept their kingdom safe while Naeduviz served as the dutiful wife at home who caused their household to prosper. Both of them excelled at different aspects, and their synergy was a match made in heaven.

From the orbital mapping by their fleet, The Flagrant Swordmaidens knew that most ancient cities settled next to rivers or rich lands surrounded by farms. They expected these cities to be the most formidable ones to approach and perhaps the least friendly against visitors from the stars.

The Flagrant Swordmaidens thought that A27 or Mulak was one of the weakest settlements on Aeon Corona VII, but obviously they misjudged.

The arrival of a sacred god with the power to summon water from beneath the ground changed everything for Mulak, causing it to host a lot more people than it used to be able to provide!

"Has Naeduviz chosen other people before you?" Ves asked the question that had been budding in his mind for some time.

According to Pirisa, Naeduviz hooked up with Hokaz several hundred standard years before. The creature was so old that it was impossible for Pirisa to be alive back then!

"She has chosen many people before my time. I am part of a long line of supplicants who Naeduviz has found worthy to share some of her divinity in exchange for acting as her representative to her subjects!" The beast rider answered with pride. "The rest of the supplicants that Naeduviz has passed over have still earned the right to tend to her needs. It is an honor for them to wash her scales, bring over her food and clean up after her waste. If Naeduviz finds me unworthy to serve as her mortal representative, then she will select her next chosen among her many supplicants."

Ves wondered how many of those 'supplicants' turn out to be potentates, and if Naeduviz and the other sacred gods expressly seek out that potential. The natives might have lost the means to test for genetic aptitude, as detectors that looked out for those markers were fairly complex machines.

By now, they had finally reached the open gate. The double doors had been retracted by a large number of slaves in complicated mechanism that wouldn't look out of place in a historical drama!

The lack of powered motors suggested that the natives had slid back enormously during their isolation from the outside galaxy. Even after thousands of years had passed under accelerated time, they hadn't regained their old base of knowledge nor developed it on their own!

That was clearly abnormal!

Captain Clarissa quickly shushed the men and women from mentioning the backwardness of the ancient city. Telling Pirisa and her sacred god what a crappy place her city looked like would probably provoke the big beast.

The inhabitants of the city had come up to the wide streets to stare at the strange visitors and their outlandish-looking armor. None of the inhabitants or beast riders wore any form of armor. All of them wore a measure of basic clothes that could have been woven by simple low-tech textile machines.

In general, most of the locals didn't seem so different from the low-class laborers from planets like Bentheim. They looked poor but fairly content with their lot. Ves mainly distinguished them from the more affluent population by how fancy their clothes looked like and much jewelry they wore.

A small number of men and women stood apart and sometimes surrounded themselves with guards armed with sticks. Ves mentally classified them as part of the middle class of Mulak.

Unlike the lower class who regarded the visitors with fear and superstition, the middle class looked at them with cautious hope, as if the entry of the newcomers might lead to opportunities to enrich themselves.

The tall metal structures dominating the main avenue looked even more rusted and worn up close. Ves even spotted marks which used to be damaged but had been patched over with different sheets of metal. This city must have survived several attacks over the span of its long life.

Nobody knew for certain when this city had been founded. The most extreme estimates put its at almost three-thousand years, which was closely after the time the Starlight Megalodon had crashlanded on Aeon Corona VII.

Perhaps the initial survivors had been farsighted enough to recognize that they needed to settle this planet for the long term, and used their surviving vehicles and machines to settle the fifty-odd cities that existed to today.



That still didn't explain why the descendants of the initial survivors settled more lands outside of the cities. This planet was big enough to accommodate a thousand times more cities without any of them encroaching on each other's territories, so why did they remain so sparse all this time?

Ves and the rest hoped to hear the answer to this question soon.