

Chapter 791 Blessed and Cursed

The ancient city of Mulak presented a contrast between permanence and adaptation. From his own observations and from Pirisa's narration of her spotty understanding of its history, Ves gathered that the city had been erected a long time ago.

Mulak used to look different. Tall structures covered in gleaming silver-like alloy, with every function supported by a bevy of electronics and machinery. The city used to be settled in this arid, mineral-rich region to extract valuable exotics before shipping them to other cities set up as industrial centers.

That happened a long time ago, when contact between the cities used to be frequent. The breakdown of transportation vehicles over the centuries made contact with other cities less and less viable, until each of the cities eventually wallowed in isolation amid rusting structures and decaying technology.

In fact, Pirisa showed a distinct measure of surprise when the Vandals idly mentioned that they knew the location of over fifty cities like Mulak! Most of the inhabitants today didn't even know the existence of other cities, while the cadre working directly for the chosen of the sacred gods only heard of a couple of other settlements ruled by other sacred gods.

"Are the other settlements that you know of ruled by their own sacred gods as well?" Captain Clarissa asked.

The Swordmaiden officer had been content to let the Vandal eggheads ask most of the questions, and only occasionally plied the exobeast rider with critical questions.

Pirisa scowled as she continued to ride on top of Naeduviv. "As far as I am aware of, every city is ruled by a pantheon of sacred gods. There is no way for a city to survive in these challenging times without the protection of a sacred god that has generously offered its protection to the population."

"What threatens the cities?"

"What else but other gods? The lands outside the walls of our hallowed cities are the domains of wild gods and their aberrant godlings cast out in the thousands. They hunger for flesh, and consider humans such as us as delicacies."

The fleet hadn't spotted any of such beasts from orbit, but then again the astral winds made it exceptionally difficult to identify any details smaller than a big city that spanned for at least a kilometer.

"Are these wild gods of the same kind as your sacred gods?"

"Absolutely not!" Pirisa thundered back with an indignant expression, and Naeduis released a low roar as if the beast took offense as well. "The wild gods are degenerated spawn, squandering their godly gifts to satisfy their base urges. They are a menace that prowls the lands away from the cities, preying upon every traveler or people who attempt to found new cities. Only through the blessing of our sacred gods are we able to defend against the mindless aggression of the wild gods."

The Vandals and the Swordmaidens both looked horrified. If the rest of the surface of the planet had been claimed by exobeasts similar to the sacred gods but with no restraint, then it was no wonder that the descendants of the original crew hadn't been able to gain dominion over Aeon Ccorona VII.

"Do wild gods 'choose' humans as representatives?" Ves asked.

"Most do not. They are ignorant spawn, and prefer to eat our kind first. However, there are some wild gods who are older and more cunning than the average of its kind. They choose a representative among the wildlings that stalks the lands. They are twice as ferocious in combat, but are still no match for elder sacred gods such as Hokaz and Naeduis."

Naeduis roared her approval at her rider's statement.

"Wildlings?"

"They are like us, but not. They are cursed people, deformed by the gods and left to fend for themselves in the lands. Most end up in the bellies of the wild gods, but some have succeeded in tricking these brutes into becoming their lackeys. That is when the wildlings are at their most dangerous. When the wild gods band together with the cursed people, they cast their greedy eyes at the cities. The wild gods would love nothing but to gorge on the blessed people who possesses the purest blood, while the wildlings eagerly wish to take a city for themselves."

The amount of history and information that Pirisa had revealed stunned them all, so much in fact that they hardly took in the sights as they continued to walk along the broadest boulevard. The tall structures grew even taller, and some of the buildings appeared to have taken the place of other ones as their architecture looked distinctly different.

Most of the structures consisted of housing but not too many shops and workplaces. A city with a population of well over a 100,000 people all needed to do something, but the districts they passed looked a bit too small. They hadn't spotted any farms, but the existence of grocery stores and market stalls selling various Earth-derived foods proved that this city definitely got their food from somewhere.

One implication about the wildlings stood out to some of the Vandals. Dr. Tillman followed up with a question of her own.

"These wildlings.. are they human? How can they survive outside of the cities and their antigrav fields without getting crushed by this planet's heavy gravity?"

"Antigrav fields? Gravity? What are these words you speak of?"

"It's the effect that pulls your flesh, bones and blood down to the ground once you step outside the city." Chief Dakkon supplied a simple explanation.

"Ah! The pull of the soil!" Pirisa lit up in recognition. "The blessed people of Mulak and the other ancient cities are protected from this curse. On the other hand, the cursed revel in the curse, embracing its foul pain as the source of their strength. The curse has turned them into a parody of blessed people such as us, turning them short and squat but also making them broad and strong. They are slow to move but relentless in their cruelty against the blessed people. They hate us for our blessings and beauty. I pray the wildlings never capture you alive, because you will not enjoy what they have in store for you."

The Vandals and Swordmaidens looked at each other. They recognized the description of these so-called wildlings as the so-called dwarf strain of high gravity variants of the human race.

Though it wasn't polite to call them that in civilized space, dwarves underwent a rather extreme genetic treatment that tried to minimize their energy consumption. They possessed stronger muscles and exceptionally tough internal organs. However, they were also about half to two-thirds as tall as a baseline human as bigger bodies simply meant they required more energy to maintain.

Dwarves usually emerged when a state or faction wanted to colonize a heavy gravity planet on the cheap. After all, a full-sized heavy gravity variant of the human race required at least several times the calories per day to survive compared to a dwarf.

Though it cost quite a bit of money to modify the genes of an existing human into a dwarf, the biggest benefit to a colony owner was that the offspring of the dwarves carried the same genes. Therefore, over time the upfront costs paid for themselves as the population of dwarves continued to grow and expand.

"When the Starlight Megalodon crashed, the gene labs or the exobiologists who presided over them likely survived." Dr. Tillman whispered into the short-ranged comm built into their combat armor. "The legacy of their work is all around us. Perhaps every form of life on this planet carries their touch."

Though medium and long-ranged communications wouldn't be possible as the immense Naeduvīs they walked next to emitted too much interference simply by existing, strong short-ranged comms could still pierce through the wall of noise.

"Aren't exobiologists supposed to show more restraint?" Ves asked. "Back when the Starlight Megalodon initially went missing, a different mood prevailed. The Age of Mechs was still young back then and the horrors of the Age of Conquest still scarred our race. The backlash against rampant genetic modification still ran its course."

The exobiologist tilted her head. "Baseline humans stand a very poor chance at survival on this planet, especially when it had just started to undergo terraforming that might not be completed in their lifetimes. It makes sense for them to tailor the genes of their crewman and survivors to adapt to the conditions of the planet. What I'm still uncertain of is whether the genes of the blessed people have been tampered as well. I'm discreetly attempting to take some DNA samples from the locals, but I'll have to return to the lab at our camp before I can analyse them thoroughly."

All in all, the exobiologists essentially split the crew or their descendants into two distinct subraces. This led to the predictable consequence of starting a life-long conflict between the related strains of humanity.

Ordinarily, the dwarves should have triumphed on this planet and proceeded to build a sprawling civilization of their own after thousands of years of isolated development. With all of their genetic enhancements, they should have become the favored masters of Aeon Corona VII.

Yet if Pirisa spoke the truth, they were some of the most worse off tribes of humans on the planet!

"It's these exobeasts that are worshipped as gods that are to blame." Captain Clarissa explained. "If the technology level of the inhabitants of Mulak is the same as in the other cities, then humans have no way to defend against the predation of the gods. An essential condition to mastering an entire planet is to become strong enough to fight back against the apex predators that lord it over to the other species."

The Swordmaiden captain made sense. While they didn't know how many of these wild gods stalked the lands, it was undeniable that any settlement that wasn't surrounded by a thick alloy wall would probably be defenseless against even a single giant creature.

"Enough about my people!" Pirisa said. "Naeduis has expressed her curiosity of your people. You look blessed like us, but your bodies carry the scent of metals instead of gods such as ours. Do you not worship any gods like us?"

Uh oh. This was a sensitive topic. Answering this question demanded a lot of care, because the wrong answer might affront their beliefs and lead to a religious clash where flaring tempers could easily descend into violence.

Religious disagreements had always been one of the main causes of internal human conflict throughout the history of their race!

Captain Byrd supplied an answer that alluded to the truth. "Our gods are different than yours. As we have stated earlier, we have come from beyond the vault of the gods. Our lands are different and our customs are different."

"Is that truly so?" Pirisa mused. "Naeduis cannot imagine that any of the blessed people is able to come from the skies. Are their lands floating above the vault of the gods as stated in the legends? Why would you ever descend upon these cursed lands? It is no paradise here. The Age of Gods is in full

sway and mortals such as you and I must fight hard to continue our existence."

It sounded as if the descendants inherited almost nothing of the knowledge that the survivors should have passed on. Ves and the other Vandals and Swordmaidens no longer believed the ignorance of the locals was due to natural regression. Even if the descendants lacked the technological aids of their CFA forefathers, they still should have retained a lot more knowledge.

If nothing else, their society should have at least produced innovations of their own. Instead, all they encountered was proof of a long and continuous decline in knowledge, technology and advancement.

Why hadn't they invented new machines? Why hadn't they explored the sciences? For what reason had they slid so far backwards that they didn't even know about the existence of mechs?

What happened to the original CFA officers and crewmen when they initially emerged from the Starlight Megalodon?

Chapter 792 Yokels

Naeduis and Pirisa slowly led the delegation to a massive palace constructed out of salvaged metal situated in the center of the city. It looked obvious to Ves and the others that the palace emerged much later than the original city.

Irregular plates of metal had been welded together with the crudest of techniques. The irregular pieces likely came from the structures that used to occupy this expansive space. The architecture of the palace accommodated the size of the sacred gods by incorporating a huge hall in the very center where two or three of the beasts might fit in with room to spare for their human subjects.

The hosts held a banquet in the hall. Naeduis took up the most space in the hall by far, and her proximity to the dining table exacted a lot of pressure on the delegation and the officials invited to attend the gathering.

Servants garbed in basic liveried uniforms served up simple dishes of Earth-derived foodstuffs. Pirisa and the city officials treated the bread, beans, rice along with simple vegetables such as lettuce and broccoli as sumptuous luxuries, and they became extremely delighted when the servants brought in tiny cuts of meats.

Pirisa enjoyed the biggest cut of meat of all, as hers was the size of a hand. The delegation along with the officials only got to enjoy a thumb-sized piece of what appeared to be chicken meat.

Naeduis on the other hand enjoyed a wildly different treatment. The sacred god lounged in the center of the hall surrounded by tribalistic idols and decorations. Supplicants carted in whole roasted pigs by carts, and the exobeast crunched on them enthusiastically as they came in a fast and practiced pace.

It seemed as if most of the cooks in the employ of the palace were solely there to serve the sacred gods! Providing food for the other humans in the hall obviously became an afterthought. After all, serving food to a god was infinitely more prestigious than serving some mortals!

Despite the plainness of the dishes and the lack of seasoning except for a dash of salt, Dr. Tillman enthusiastically poked and prodded her food. When the hosts weren't looking at her, she quietly took minute samples and stored them in the storage compartments of her suit.

"What did you learn about the food?" Ves asked. "Are they of normal human stock?"

The exobiologist shook her head. "I'm very certain that they are not. While the CFA possesses a genetic database of almost every baseline earth species, most of them won't grow at all under heavy gravity. Even if the plants and animals are reared within the city somewhere, the environmental conditions are so different that they won't be able to yield as much without some genetic tailoring. I'll have to get back to the lab to be sure, but I'm already certain that the food we are being served with come from fast-growing, nutrient-enhanced stock."

Foodstuffs with added nutritional value became the favored crops of poor and struggling colonies that couldn't import or cultivate anything better. They often tasted bland and paler than the real thing, but at the very least they were a step up from nutrient packs.

They also demanded a lot less capital to produce. Even the simplest subsistence farms could easily cultivate these kinds of easy-to-deal-with crops. Nutrient packs on the other hand could only be economically produced in massive production complexes that employed a host of advanced machines.

The disparity in the food enjoyed by the sacred god and the humans hit home the status disparity between the two of them. Perhaps half or more of the city's total food production had been dedicated to feeding these voracious beasts!

During the banquet, the locals cautiously began to engage the delegation in conversation. Pirisa herself invited Captain Byrd and Captain Clarissa at the highest table and began to chat amiably about various matters.

The visitors did not dare to discuss too much serious topics, and neither did they wish to introduce too many strange concepts to the locals. They knew that they were dealing with ignorant people who bore little resemblance to their grand ancestors who once crewed a CFA battleship.

The disparity between their origins and their current existence couldn't be more stark.

The city officials mostly directed their questioning to the Swordmaidens. In comparison to the Vandals who looked rather plain, the Swordmaidens all looked impressive in their pirate getups. Each of their suits of armor incorporated beast bone trophies, and regaling the natives of their hunts earned them instant kudos.

Still, not every city official neglected the Vandals. Compared to the basic clothes worn by the locals, suits of armor was a distinct rarity to them. The fact that the visitors all wore some form of armor already impressed them a lot.

"How are you able to move under all of that weight? We once attempted to adorn our chosen with metal plates, but they were simply too heavy for them to bear!" A city guard commander asked.

Ves and Chief Dakkon looked at each other before the latter decided to answer. "Our studies into metallurgy is very advanced. We don't utilize the heavy metal plates that are used in the construction of the ancient city. We blend lighter metals into strong alloys that weighs several times less than the material that you used. In addition, the heavier suits incorporate small servos that act like extra muscles. These servos help us lift most of the weight."

The way the locals within earshot stared at the chief engineer was as if he was a wizard describing the profoundness of one of his magic spells. These yokels truly didn't know anything!

"What kind of a master craftsman is able to create such a magnificent equipment? This is truly a marvel of craftsmanship!"

The more the guard commander looked at the suits of armor, the more he became enamoured by their bulk and protective ability. Not even Pirisa refrained from throwing an admiring glance or two at their gear.

The Swordmaidens especially drew a lot of attention due to their greatswords. The big weapons made for an imposing sight, and Lieutenant Dise even showed off the considerable technological advancements incorporated in their forging by chopping down a thick metal chair in half with an effortless swing!

"This is not a weapon crafted by mortal means!" A priest-like figure uttered with shaking eyes. "I know what gods these visitors worship now! It all makes sense! Their giant metal golems and their magical weapons and armor are blessed by gods different from ours! These strangers from beyond must be worshipping gods related to craftsmanship!"

"Ah, I see! No wonder their ability to shape metal into form is so impressive!"

"We should petition Hokaz to invite one of these gods of craftsmanship to our pantheon!"

"That is not proper! We worship the sacred gods of the wastes for many cycles now. Inviting a foreign god from different lands will throw our people into turmoil!"

As the locals discussed the implications of their 'discovery', the Vandals and Swordmaidens all shared an awkward glance.

A discreet message whispered in their ears over their short-ranged comms. Captain Clarissa's clipped voice told them what to do. "Just roll with it. Let the natives believe we worship a god of craftsmanship if that is what it takes for them to accept our presence. Try not to lie or make something up about our supposed god. Defer to Captain Byrd and I if the locals persist."

The rest of the conversation took an awkward turn as the locals tried to prod the Vandals and Swordmaidens of their gods. To the locals, they couldn't imagine these visitors who resembled blessed people like them to be any different from them. Every person who resembled a baseline human must be blessed by one god or another! They simply couldn't fathom the idea that an

entire galaxy of humans existed that didn't believe in any supreme supernatural being!

Ves found it tiring to interact with the locals without tripping on their sensibilities or revealing more than they ought to know right now. Their ignorance benefited the visitors because their lack of knowledge made them gullible. Their ignorance also made things difficult because the locals plainly couldn't handle some essential truths.

For instance, Captain Byrd and Captain Clarissa had an extremely hard time trying to close a trade deal. Pirisa constantly pushed off the decision, stating that it was something for the gods to decide. As a chosen of Naeduis, she acted as the sacred god's voice, and did not have the right to decide on major matters by herself.

Pirisa claimed that the exobeasts called all the shots, and the two captains had no choice but to believe in that statement. It would take a significant amount of time for the exobeasts to come to a consensus on how to engage with the visitors who claimed to have come from beyond the vault of the gods.

"Hokaz and Naeduis will call for a council of the gods in due time." Pirisa stated with mild regret. "Naeduis has heard all of your offers and demands, and will present them to the council for our sacred gods to deliberate. Hokaz will make a final judgement on the matter, and his word is law in Mulak. The consideration of the gods is very different from mortals."

Pirisa couldn't even say when the sacred gods held their council of the gods. Time was a very imprecise concept among the locals. Timekeeping devices became another victim of the native society's technological decay.

It didn't help that Seven didn't exhibit a true day and night cycle, so the methods the locals used to count the time was based on ridiculous intervals such as the span of time a sacred god demanded to be fed!

At the end of the banquet, Pirisa ordered some city guards and officials to escort the visitors out. Mulak abided by the basic principles of hospitality, but obviously didn't appreciate their house guests to stay for what passed for a night among the locals.

Naeduviss herself snorted at the strangers after she finished gorging tons of meat, and lazily flicked her tail at them before falling asleep in the middle of the hall.

The city of Mulak was her domain! Her mate granted her complete discretion in how to handle the visitors. Right now, she wanted to do nothing more than to take a nap after exerting herself in battle earlier, so she succumbed to basic desires without paying too much attention to anything else.

A few hours later, the ten Vandals and Swordmaidens returned to their mechs and fast transports without much of a resolution. Despite the lack of progress in closing some kind of deal, the delegation already learned more than enough to make the visit worth it. Pirisa herself had been a font of information as she finally described the principal threats of the lands.

"Return to camp!"

Almost eighty mechs and two fast transports proceeded to march back to their camp. Before the sacred gods came to a decision, nothing could be gained from waiting outside the city walls.

A handful of Swordmaiden mechs carried Lieutenant Dise's Devil Razor. The mech lost all functionality when the lightning storm called down by the Tyrant of the Wastes fried most of its processors and delicate systems. When Ves inspected the mech, he immediately declared it a wreck. It required an extensive overhaul of its internal systems before it could be brought to life again!

Ves and the other experts quietly sat behind their consoles and processed some of the data that they gathered.

Dr. Tillman wrote preliminary reports on the exobeasts and the so-called blessed people that looked like baseline humans but exhibited minor physiological differences.

Chief Dakkon wrote about the city and primitive technology utilized by the descendants of this generation. He had much to say about the complete lack of technological progress!

As for Ves, he continued to think about the strange interaction between the sacred gods and their chosen. Who truly ruled the city? Were the sacred gods truly sentient beings?

What about the wild gods that had never partnered with a human before? Would they be as wild as animals, or were they born with inborn intelligence?

Chapter 793 Primitive Threats

It took a bit more than a standard day for the first contact delegation and its escorts to return to camp. Carrying Lieutenant Dise's electrically-fried mech back without damaging it further required a lot of coordination on the part of the mechs that carried the wreck. They had to slow down when they traversed difficult terrain in order to avoid jostling the damaged but restorable frame.

In the meantime, the Vandal and Swordmaiden experts all exchanged their data and observations among themselves and discussed some of the implications. The mutual exchange helped everyone out as everyone possessed a different perspective.

Frankly, Ves didn't play too much of a role this time because the inhabitants of Mulak didn't make use of any mechs at all. Instead, their principal form of defense came in the form of their exobeasts!

With their sacred gods acting as their main line of defense, was there any need for them to develop mechs? They could just grow a giant beast and proclaim it as a god to convince the dumb creature to defend their cities. It was a lot more convenient to maintain a tamed exobeast than a mech because the latter needed extensive logistical support in the long term.

"The entire city is geared first and foremost on supporting their pantheon of gods." Ves explained his thoughts. "With the amount of food they must be consuming at set intervals, the city can barely spare any infrastructure on anything big like mechs, shuttles or tanks. Research and development, production and maintenance all require hundreds of scientists, engineers, technicians, machinists and more to get an entire industry sector up and running. Nothing we've seen so far of Mulak suggests that the city possesses any significant industry."

"Mulak was never an industrial city in the first place." Chief Dakkon concurred. "According to the abbreviated history told by Pirisa, Mulak used to be the center of a resource harvesting operation. Ores and raw materials flowed to the city before being shipped elsewhere. If any cities have managed to retain some semblance of technology, it should be at those settlements geared towards industry."

All of this sounded interesting, and implied a means for the Flagrant Swordmaidens to come to some sort of mutually beneficial agreement with the locals.

Their mistaken impression that the visitors worshipped some sort of smithing or crafting god already laid down the road to further cooperation. Chief Dakkon already developed hundreds of potential suggestions to improve the defenses and the standard of living of Mulak.

"The city is an ancient relic." Dakkon said as he showed off projections of various images that his suit had taken. "Look at these portions. The metal

sheets that are covering up these sections used to be occupied by various machines and electrical devices. They all wore down over hundreds or thousands of years due to lack of maintenance, so the city isn't functioning as it used to. I can easily restore some of the functionality of these machines with some basic supplies and the help of a crew of technicians."

"I'll take your suggestions under advisement." Captain Byrd replied as she had remained in thought throughout the journey back. "Mind you, we want to be as efficient as possible in our trades. Seeing that the cities are essentially independent city-states with no apparent contact with each other, it's fine for us to trade for basic knowledge. It doesn't cost us anything to hand over some data pads containing various manuals and technical specifications to every city open for trade."

Though they hadn't seen much of the city, what they already observed from the main boulevard that ran through the middle of the settlement already showed that the inhabitants lived in their own self-contained world.

The blessed people that lived in the cities never contemplated traveling to another city. The potential trade benefits simply didn't measure up to the massive risk of predation along the way.

Pirisa and the city officials already named the three most prominent threats.

The wildlings consisting of feral tribes of genetically engineered dwarves felt right at home under heavy gravity conditions.

It was a question how worse off their society had degenerated over the years of divergence. If the blessed people resembled a society that lived in medieval times, then the cursed people living in the wilds had likely gone back to the era of tribes!

In fact, the dwarves didn't sound very intimidating at all. The second threat that posed a potential danger to the ground forces was the offspring of the

gods in the wild. As small and fast breeders, practically all of godlings perished before they reached their full potential. Still, different species and subraces sometimes traveled by the thousands, and they could easily overwhelm a city if it didn't put up a serious defense.

According to the locals, the godlings were a scourge upon the lands, preying on the native herbivores and the wildlings alike, sometimes to extinction. Their hordes constantly roamed across the planet for that reason. This also allowed newer populations of animals and wildlings to settle on the emptied lands.

This warped ecological cycle made it very unsafe for anything less than a sacred god to venture far outside a city.

Yet even a sacred god could be felled in the wilds. The culprits often comprised of the third and most serious threat someone could face on the planet, which were the wild gods.

Neither Ves nor anyone else could figure out from Pirisa's description whether the wild gods possessed any sentience. They also lacked the crystals implanted on their bodies shortly after their birth that enabled them to call upon an energy tornado to siphon away some higher-dimensional energy and temporarily store them in the reservoirs for later use.

This distinguished wild gods from their more civilized counterparts. Nonetheless, even a sacred god could be brought down by superior numbers that attempted to exhaust the grand exobeast of its godly powers.

Still, if the Flagrant Swordmaidens ever encountered packs of wild gods in their upcoming trek to the Starlight Megalodon, then they could easily take care of the big lumbering beasts by bombarding it with a bevy of lasers from a distance.

Even if the wild gods possessed the ability to summon an energy field, their mechs could quickly overwhelm its defenses after it endured a couple of hundred laser beams!

The only threat that truly concerned the Flagrant Swordmaidens was if a wild god acquired a wildling beast rider. The combination of raw animal intelligence with the sentient mind of a dwarf could accomplish a lot of awful things!

"Keep in mind that what Pirisa and her people has told us is colored by their perspectives." Captain Byrd cautioned as the experts tried to figure out how much of a threat a wild god posed when directed by a wildling. "She painted her own kind and us as blessed people while calling those who roam outside the cities as cursed people. Perhaps to the wildlings, they are true blessed subrace of humanity while the city folk are relics of a past age who won't be able to thrive on this planet after all of their antigrav modules slowly break down."

Chief Dakkon looked up at that. "Ma'am, I don't believe that the gravity in Mulak is being moderated by conventional antigrav modules. The sensor readings that I've managed to gather failed to spot any of the characteristic emissions released by antigrav modules. Something else is maintaining a stable antigrav field over the entire city, and it might be based off something else than technology."

"Do you have any clue, chief?"

"None so far, ma'am. However, I do want to state that if their technological mastery has fallen so far behind that they're unable to develop something like a steam engine, then it is simply impossible that they can keep an antigrav module up and running for more than a couple of decades since their last round of servicing. Considering how much time has passed since the founding of the city and which I've confirmed by dating some of the samples of its

structures, the locals must have developed a non-technological alternative to maintaining a stable gravity."

"Could it be the sacred gods and those strange crystals embedded into their hides?" Ves suggested. Everyone gained a fascination for the crystals because they possessed the rare ability to interact with the astral winds. "They effectively keep their beast riders from getting crushed by the planet's gravity."

"Possible, but I can't say for sure. I doubt we can get our hands on those crystals so easy. The sacred gods seem to prize them a lot, even harvesting them from the carcasses of others of their species."

The speculation about the crystals ran for hours as everyone pitched in their theories. Chief Dakkon had the most to say of all, but even he only scratched the surface of its wonders. Despite the raft of raw sensor data their mechs and transports had captured, they had come no closer to understanding their workings from before!

Nonetheless, everyone already recognized their potential uses. Obtaining the crystals or achieving an understanding of their workings became the highest priorities of the Flagrant Swordmaidens!

If they ever unlocked the secrets and gained the ability to call down their own energy tornado and convert the higher-dimensional energy into electrical energy, then perhaps the ground forces would no longer have to worry about their energy budgets!

Still, the locals wouldn't give up such a prized advantage easily. Captain Byrd sighed in disappointment. "Captain Clarissa and I broached the topic of trading for one of those crystals. Pirisa refused to entertain such possibilities no matter how many carrots we dangled in front of her head. These crystals are extremely rare and even the sacred gods of Mulak can't obtain them in

large numbers. Unless we offer something extremely substantial, they would never dream of trading away a valuable crystal."

If the Flagrant Swordmaidens really wanted to, they could come up with something extremely precious to exchange for one of those so-called god crystal. Right now though, the Flagrant Swordmaidens weren't interested in empowering the locals too much.

By the time the delegation returned to camp, the news of their experiences spread throughout the camp like wildfire.

Sacred gods! Wildlings! Godlings! And the dreaded wild gods! All of the tales the Vandals and the Swordmaidens released without reservations all came as a massive shock.

Tales of exobeasts interfacing with their chosen beast riders became an especially interesting story to those that had never witnessed such a thing. The Swordmaidens who value strength and often hunted exobeasts for sport became instantly enamored by such a possibility! Some of the more aggressive Swordmaidens couldn't wait to run off into the wilds to find an isolated wild god to tame!

When Ves returned to one of the workshops of erected by the Vandals, Ketis instantly arrived and started to bug him for stories.

"C'mon Ves! Tell me more about the big gods and their beast riders! Are there any gods with wings? What are the powers of the other exobeasts? Were all of them bigger than a heavy mech or are you just pulling my leg?"

Ves chuckled a bit. "If you're so curious about how they look like and how they fight, you can help me analyze the footage and sensor readings we've captured."

He pushed her to a spare terminal and granted her access to a raft of raw footage and sensor data. "Just take a look at them and try and figure out what

is going on. Any insights you can figure out will help us understand the sacred god and possibly even allow us to replicate the feat, though I don't really see why we need to. Our mechs are more than enough to defend our expedition."

"You don't know anything! Don't you see how cool it is to tame and ride those big majestic beasts? I wonder if we'll be allowed to take them aboard our ships after we complete our mission! It would be so great to add them to our roster so we can field the equivalent of a heavy mech in our future landbound deployments!"

Ves tried to imagine the Swordmaidens replacing some of their mechs with sacred gods and couldn't quite process the absurdity!

Chapter 794 Unequal Exchange

The relations between the Flagrant Swordmaidens and the ancient city of Mulak started off frosty. Though the two duels fought between the champion mech pilots and the so-called sacred gods earned the visitors some respect, the primitive society that ruled over the city couldn't handle too much change at one time.

The sociologists and related experts in the service of the Flagrant Vandals collaborated together with the experienced Swordmaidens to formulate a plan of engagement with Mulak.

"We've stoked their interest with our technological prowess and what we can bring to the table." Captain Byrd said during a conference meeting shortly after the return of the delegation party. "On the other hand, we have sounded out their willingness to trade for information and goods such as their god crystals. The only problem is that they are rather reticent to an exchange. Pirisa claims the decision lies with the sacred gods."

Captain Orfan snorted. "They're big dumb beasts! What do they know about trade? I bet the reason why the city has slid so far backwards in technology is because those humans turned into their cattle!"

Some of the officers, experts and chiefs shifted in their armor. This theory gained prominence among the rank and file. They believed that the main reason why the blessed people lost touch with technology was because they turned into religious nuts that put the welfare of the exobeasts ahead of their own people.

Naturally, the Vandals would never admit that to the face of one of the blessed people.

"There is definitely a driving force behind the inability of the natives to maintain their past level of technology, but we are not here to enlighten them. We can leave that to the CFA who will inevitably send a follow-up fleet to the Aeon Corona System. Right now, we need to focus on gaining an advantage that will ease our journey to the Starlight Megalodon. Chief Dakkon, how soon can we begin to move?"

"Our preparations continue to proceed on schedule, ma'am." The chief engineer answered while he referenced a data pad. "If you want a fast start, we can begin to depart immediately within a standard week. However, I suggest we delay the departure date by another week so that we can make some preparations against the threats the natives have outlined."

"What do these extra preparations consist of?"

"The natives described three threats which fall into two categories, ma'am. Our mechs can handle the large exobeasts referred to as wild gods, but if a horde of more than a thousand wildlings or godlings storm our moving supply train, then we might not be able to eliminate them quickly enough before they reach our legged transports. They're like ants to our mechs. While our machines can kill them by the hundreds, once they reach our transports it becomes difficult to dislodge them without damaging our own vehicles. This is why we are augmenting the transports with various countermeasures."

The Vandals also beefed up their anti-infantry countermeasures and increased their vigilance against infiltrators.

As weapons of war, mechs could handle most types of opponents on the battlefield, but that did not mean they were applicable in every situation. Traditionally, they fared most poorly in urban environments where saboteurs avoided the mechs and sneaked on foot to assassinate important officers or sabotage critical supply depots.

Captain Byrd approved of the measures. Though they only had the word of the natives to go upon, it didn't hurt to be more prepared.

"Slowpokes!"

On the other hand, Captain Orfan chafed at the delay. The Flagrant Swordmaidens deployed around five-hundred landbound mechs in total! That was enough power to steamroll through every settlement on the planet! Why did they have to show any scruples to degenerated dwarves and stupid wildlife?

Everyone pretty much learned to ignore her frustrated outbursts, so the meeting proceeded smoothly as everyone chipped in to the meeting.

Ves reported on the progress of fixing up the mechs.

"The cockpit modifications have proceeded ahead of schedule. Now that the mech technicians are familiar with the procedure, they're able to convert the cockpits faster than before. Within a week, all of our mech pilots will be able to recline in their seats to some extent, helping them cope with the heavy gravity if the antigrav modules built in to the gravitic backpacks, cockpits and their piloting suits all fail for some reason."

"What about the light mechs, Mr. Larkinson?"

"Their situation isn't as good as the larger mechs, ma'am." He conceded. "The dimensions of the interior of a light mech cockpit is severely cramped. They're meant to be as small and light as possible for a given degree of combat effectiveness, so mech designers often opt for the smallest cockpits they can get away with. None of our light mechs are geared towards heavy gravity operations, so I've been forced to finagle improved solutions by ripping away non-essential cockpit parts in order to make room."

"Will that affect the functioning of the light mechs?"

"Not too much, ma'am. It is a worthwhile tradeoff, and most of the light mech pilots agree."

Ves sometimes pushed through changes without consulting the mech pilots, but this was one change which directly impacted the mech pilots. Overall, they gave out a positive response, because they did not want to end up stuck in a sitting position if the power to their antigrav modules somehow all cut off.

Once they blacked out, it was game over!

A few days went by after the meeting. While the Vandals and the Swordmaidens all worked as fast as possible to get their act together, they also attempted to increase their relations with the rulers of Mulak.

Each day, they sent out a squad of mechs to make contact with the city. At least this time the city didn't launch any boulders at the mechs, but neither did they open their gates.

Captain Clarissa expected such a response. The goal of sending the mechs into viewing distance was to build up familiarity and curiosity with the natives. They spent so long under isolation from the rest of the galaxy that they fell into considerable confusion about how to engage with the outsiders.

The Vandals and Swordmaidens fell outside of the wildlings, godlings, wild gods and the forces of the other city! As an entirely new category of people,

the inhabitants needed to make up their own minds whether to treat the newcomers with a fist or an open palm.

Ketis surprisingly showed a lot of familiarity with the current actions advocated by Captain Clarissa. She had been a part of the Swordmaidens for over a decade, so she became familiar with their playbook in terms of engaging with isolated human settlements.

"It doesn't take a lot of time for a stranded group of people to devolve into savages." She spoke as if she had personal experience in the matter, which she did. "Without a functional starship, quantum entanglement node or even a way to escape the atmosphere of an alien planet, it's easy to forget your roots."

"I understand that. So what is the Swordmaiden way to approach these settlements?"

"Well, we take full advantage of their ignorance and rip them off as much as possible." She grinned. "It's so easy to show to dangle something worthless to us as a shiny bauble in exchange for something valuable that is unique to the planet. Rare exotics, strange plants, special beasts, the locals may have gathered countless treasures without even realizing their true value."

"What if they refuse to trade? Do you attempt to use force?"

Ketis surprisingly shook her head. "Some pirates do, but we generally don't. There are few settlements in the frontier as it is. If we destroy every settlement we find in order to rob them of their goods, we can only gain one big payoff at most. It's much better to milk them of their worth through multiple visits. Each time we close a trade, the locals are much more willing to provide us what we want, and they'll even look for the resources on their own initiative. It's a win-win situation for us both!"

Well, the Swordmaidens definitely won big, while the locals may have won much less than they thought.

"What kind of goods have you traded?"

"Generally, we trade basic weapons and machines. Think of pistols, air conditioners, ground vehicles, prefab housing and other trinkets like that. One of the best ways to get into a settlement leader's good graces is to gift them with a cheap low-level laser pistol that we've plated in gold and socketed with shiny synthesized gems. Lasers are like magic to them. Possessing the only laser weapon in the settlement strengthens their positions and makes them more open to further trades with us."

Ves snorted at such a shameless means of ensuring the cooperation of the settlement. "Ah, the good ol' bribery. As long as the leaders get ahead, they don't care how much the rest of their subjects are losing out. What if the settlement is advanced enough to retain some laser weapons?"

"Then we offer something else as shiny." Ketis waved her hand dismissively. "A gold-plated suit of combat armor, for example, or a pimped-up aircar with heavy restrictions. Just letting them fly fifty meters above the ground for ten minutes at a time is enough to turn them into megalomaniacs. The capabilities aren't too important as long as they are better than anything else a primitive settlement has left. The key is to make the association that the leaders can enhance their status if they engage in trade with outsiders."

"Does it work?"

"Hmm.. not all the time, but mostly. It works best if there's a single tyrant in charge of the settlement. It gets more complicated if the isolated settlement is ruled by some kind of council. The politics can get kind of messy. We have to play the council members against each other. Sometimes, the people from the settlements are so xenophobic to outsiders that it's impossible to have a

cordial conversation with them. We usually leave them alone and move elsewhere."

The existence of isolated settlements was a lot more prevalent than most people thought. The spread of humans in the galaxy had not gone entirely without hitches. The invention of the quantum entanglement nodes helped keep the human race connected to each other, but it was impossible for their owners to repair these expensive devices once they sustained any damage!

Once a population of humans got cut off from the radiant civilization that governed half the galaxy, it was remarkable how fast they degenerated. No amount of preparation from the settlers could enable them to maintain their extremely advanced technology.

The price of greater advancement was that humans needed an ever greater base to maintain their technological development!

In fact, one of the doomsday scenarios bandied about on the galactic net was what might happen if every quantum entanglement node ceased working some day. Perhaps the Comm Consortium pulled the plug, perhaps some cosmic shockwave ran throughout the entire galaxy, perhaps some conspiracy by the aliens managed to succeed.

Whatever the cause, the sudden breakdown of all instant communication in human space would prove catastrophic. Many places would break out into riots, while others might manage to retain control, but only for a limited time.

The galactic net served an essential purpose in binding humans throughout the galaxy together no matter the distance. Its absence might make all of that come crashing down, turning states and star sectors into independent islands that developed in different directions at different speeds.

What happened to Aeon Corona VII may very well be repeated more than a billion times if such a disaster came to pass!

At this time, an alert popped up on his comm. Ves looked at the message and became stunned.

"What is it?" Ketis asked. As a lower-ranking mech designer, she usually didn't receive any important notices. "Is it the natives? Did they agree to open up to a trade?"

"No, it's not that. Our scouts sent to the nearest prairie region from the camp have encountered what they suspect to be a wild god!"

Ever since the delegation heard about the threats in the wild from Pirisa, they didn't just take her word for it. The Flagrant Swordmaidens wanted to confirm the information through first-hand encounters, and so issued long-ranged scouting missions to the nearest regions that supported life.

After a few days of searching, one of the Vandal light mechs spotted an exobeast similar to the sacred gods!

Chapter 795 Wild God

Captain Byrd called for a briefing. Now that they encountered a wild god, they weren't about to let this opportunity go. Even though a wild god was purportedly not a match for a sacred god, it still allowed the Flagrant Swordmaidens to learn a lot about both once they got their hands on the exobeast.

"Alright. Everyone knows the drill." She began. "We've managed to locate a wild god that is two days away from the camp by our faster mechs. It's a feathered lizard that is closely related to the species of some of the sacred gods, and may even be a subrace. Dr. Tillman, please tell us about the region we have found the exobeast."

The exobiologist stood up and commanded the conference room to project footage of the lush green fields of grass and shrubs. Occasional trees dotted the lands, expansive herds of herbivores derived from earth stock such as

sheep, horses and other familiar-looking animals grazed to their heart's delight.

Small groups of predators stalked the herds, preying upon the sick and old at their leisure.

All of the animals exhibited slow movements. Without the benefit of an antigrav field, the beasts moved slower and with more deliberation. Their builds were generally a bit smaller but their numbers made up for it. Each herd numbered from the low hundreds to tens of thousands!

In addition, a couple of species looked completely foreign from anything human. These must be the aboriginal species that somehow survived the drastic changes spurred by the terraforming process.

A couple of surviving species from the old biomes always manage to slip through the net during every terraforming process. As long as they were able to metabolize the Earth-compatible foods, they may be able to fit in with the intruders who have taken over their planet.

"As you can see, the prairie region it's located in is rather sparse in dense vegetation. However, don't underestimate these grasses. If they consist of the same nutritionally-fortified strains as the other flora we've sampled so far, then they can support more than enough life to keep a wild god fed."

The mech pilots frowned when they took in the sights. They didn't care so much for the animal herds, but focused on the uneven elevation of the terrain. Some of the hills angled rather steeply. This hampered the mobility of their mechs somewhat and forced them to be more mindful of their route.

"That terrain doesn't look like a great place to fight." A mech officer spoke aloud what his fellow mech pilots thought.

"We probably don't need to employ our mobility advantage against a wild god." Captain Byrd emphasized. "Unlike a sacred god, these wild gods aren't

embedded with the so-called god crystals that have displayed the capability to interact with the astral winds. Without a way to accumulate higher-dimensional energies, they shouldn't be capable of calling down a lightning storm or the like."

The Vandals poured over the sensor data they captured during the duels and still haven't really figured out what went on. The interference in the air led reduced fidelity and a lot of scrambled data. Another part of the problem was that the Vandals didn't bring the right sensors, or ones that were good enough to capture the phenomena with precision.

Chief Dakkon and Ves hastily upgraded the sensor suites of some of the mechs and transports, but neither of them felt confident they installed the right sensors. The Vandals lacked the necessary technologies that allowed them to understand an interact with higher-dimensional energies.

To put it in a different way, it was like trying to observe gamma radiation with the naked eye. You simply couldn't, and trying to mess with things you didn't understand risked incurring radiation sickness!

This was why most of their sensors attempted to capture the spillover effects of any interaction with higher-dimensional energies. The light they threw out, the spacetime distortion they produced and the heat they generated during certain transformations allowed them to generate estimates of their potency and effects.

If the wild god possessed any means to harness higher-dimensional energy, then the Vandals would be ready for that this time!

"What is our objective?" Another mech officer asked. "Are we going to kill or capture the beast?"

Capturing a beast alive was a lot harder than killing it! None of the mech pilots wanted to tussle with the beast with one of their arms bound behind their backs.

Fortunately, Captain Byrd didn't express any interest in capturing a beast alive. "We don't know much about their biology and capabilities. It's irresponsible to capture it. Besides, even if we subdued it, it's far too heavy for us to transport safely. Unless we can keep it sedated, it can break through any cage we can build."

A lot of logistical problems emerged when trying to bring a captured wild god along with them. While they possessed a lot of research value, studying them and taming them was not part of their mission. The Vandals couldn't afford to be distracted by their existence.

Captain Byrd outlined a plan where they would attempt to slay the beast from a distance by peppering it with lasers. Under the heavy gravity, they didn't expect the beast to be able to close the distance before it succumbed. It was simply too slow for that!

"We'll bring out our best marksmen for this task, including Venerable Xie." Captain Byrd said. "If nothing else, it will be good practice for him and allow us to witness the Pale Dancer in live combat. Mr. Larkinson, is his mech ready to be deployed?"

"Well, the maintenance team hasn't worked out all the kinks, but if I help out personally I can rush it within a day." Ves simply stated. He knew that speed was of the essence right now. "As long as the expert mech's gravitic backpack remains functional, the Pale Dancer won't suffer any ill effects, ma'am."

"Good. Make sure to get the Pale Dancer and the assault company ready for an extended deployment. After we kill the beast, we need to maintain guard over the site to let Dr. Tillman and our other experts perform an autopsy.

Several fast transports will tag along to bring in temporary labs as well as freezing containers to bring back large samples of meat."

Captain Orfan raised her own request. "Can we bring some cooks as well? I want a taste of that wild god meat! The yokals back at Mulak mentioned something about how it's the best tasting meat on the planet!"

A couple of Vandals laughed. Captain Byrd didn't seem so amused. "I'll allow it since we have the passenger capacity to spare. However, I'll only allow the cooks to process the meat once Dr. Tillman and her team declares the meat to be safe for consumption. Standard rules concerning the treatment of exobeasts apply."

Humans couldn't eat everything that looked like an animal in the galaxy. Just because the wild gods possessed enough similarities with Earth-based life to be able to eat and digest the wildlife spurred about by human terraforming didn't mean the same relation applied the other way.

Tales abounded in the galaxy of adventurous humans eating newly-discovered exobeast species only to drop dead because their bodies absorb poisonous substances that reacted badly to their physique!

Ves actually possessed a huge advantage in this matter. The drastic changes to his body that he gained from his misadventure on Groening IV allowed him to eat a lot of alien crap that would have poisoned a baseline human to death.

He wasn't exactly enthusiastic about taking advantage of it, though He'd rather eat nutrient packs instead.

After Captain Byrd finished getting everyone up to speed, they dispersed to make some quick preparations.

Ves assisted Lisbeth Eta-Denmersken in rushing the Pale Dancer to readiness. The half-crazy mech designer didn't like Ves very much and tried

to hinder him as much as possible, but once he sicced Ketis on her, he managed to complete the work several times more smoothly.

The other Vandals prepped the assault company for a multi-day jaunt to the prairie region. The fast transports that could somewhat keep up with the mechs carried a plentiful amount of energy cells to keep their gravitic backbacks going while also carrying enough lab equipment to facilitate the autopsy of a giant exobeast.

Naturally, the Vandals also managed to stuff jumbo-sized barbecue equipment, because the idea of eating wild god meat turned into an incredibly appealing notion to the Vandals and the Swordmaidens.

All of them wanted to come away with a story they could brag to their friends about eating the flesh of a literal god!

The next day, the transports and mechs began to depart. Eighty mechs from both forces escorted four fast transports, of which only one of them belonged to the Swordmaidens. The pirates generally didn't bother with maintaining a science department, so the Vandals bore the responsibility of researching the remains.

Inside the somewhat more crowded passenger compartment of one of the transports, Ves sat behind a terminal attempting to figure something out from the garbled sensor readings they took last time they witnessed the might of a sacred god.

He developed a theory that had caught on with the Flagrant Swordmaidens, one which stated that the wild gods and sacred gods could be directed by their beast riders akin to how mechs pilots controlled their mechs.

Some of the more boastful Vandals even claimed that they could tame the wild god as long as they sat on their backs!

Safe to say, many of the saner Vandals immediately smacked some sense into these crazy mech pilots. Who would want to risk their lives by riding on the backs of those incredibly strong and deadly beasts?!

Many people remained fascinated however, including Ketis, who tagged along with Ves this time. Mayra remained behind in camp to ensure all of the Swordmaiden mechs would be ready to march in time.

Compared to all of that boring stuff, Ketis rather preferred to tag along with the hunting party!

Still, it took at least two days to reach the prairie, so she currently idled away her time by twirling her green hair around her finger.

"What are you looking at, Ves?" She asked in a bored tone.

He grimaced. "I'm trying to figure out the nature of the connection between the beast riders and the sacred gods. To be more specific, I'm keeping my eyes out for any clue that might suggest that this is a natural or engineered phenomenon."

"What does that matter?"

"The answer is extremely important. Most of us believe that it can't be a coincidence that the exobeasts are able to interface with a human mind. They all think that some crazy exobiologists from the Starlight Megalodon had spawned them out of nowhere or modified an existing alien species into the monsters they are today."

"Isn't it obvious?" She frowned. "There's no way a creature like that has evolved the ability to interface their minds with a different species out of the blue. And the tricks the sacred gods showed off are just like how expert mechs show off their resonance abilities. Do you think the exobiologists worked together with some really smart mech designers into designing these gods? It's like they are made to be living mechs!"

That phrase triggered Ves a bit. Over the preceding days, Ves tried to process the existence of exobeasts capable of interfacing with the human mind. Was this a potential direction for development?

Eventually, he rejected this approach. Although a final product already existed, these exobeasts truly couldn't be called mechs. Exobiology was very different from mech design!

He issued a firm correction to his former student. "Don't call them living mechs. That brings out a flawed association between mechs and exobeasts. The wild gods and sacred gods of Aeon Corona VII are living, thinking organic creatures. The biggest difference between mechs and these beasts are that the latter are already functional and dangerous on their own. Don't underestimate the threat they pose. I bet this wild god has some tricks up its sleeve in order to survive the harsh conditions of this planet."

The natives didn't call them wild gods for nothing. While they hadn't been entirely forthcoming about the capabilities of either types of gods, the fact that they considered them to be divine should be deeply concerning to the Vandals and Swordmaidens about to hunt one of them down.

Mortals weren't supposed to challenge the gods!

Chapter 796 Wild Tremors

The hunting party eventually crossed over into prairie terrain. The terrain became a little harder to navigate, and if the Vandals made use of wheeled or tracked vehicles, then they would have slowed down to a crawl.

Fortunately, the legged transports which derived some of their shape from insects possessed enough maneuverability to walk over most irregularities in the terrain. They didn't even slow down that much when they had to climb uphill.

To speed up their progress, every mech and transport maintained their own antigrav fields. Though costly in terms of energy, sustaining it for a day or two wouldn't break their energy budget.

Still, if they kept the antigrav modules running at all times, then eventually they would run out of energy after a month or two. That was way too fast and would put them at a huge disadvantage.

How could they compete for the treasures of the Starlight Megalodon if their mechs moved like snails and their melee mechs couldn't even lift up their weapons without taking seconds to do so?

Besides the occasional supply shipments sent down from the fleet that had begun mining operations on one of the moons, the only other way to supplement their energy was to find a local source.

This was why they put so much emphasis on their entreaties with the ancient city of Mulak. If the natives traded the means of siphoning some of the higher-dimensional energies for their own uses in exchange for something like a water purifier or a basic power reactor, then the Vandals wouldn't have to worry about this issue so much.

They didn't even know if it was possible to convert the higher-dimensional energies into electricity or some other form that the Vandals were capable of harnessing. For all they knew, only through the medium of a sacred god would they be able to secure an endless power source.

In any case, one of the reasons why the Flagrant Swordmaidens wanted to dissect a wild god was because they may be able to figure out this energy conversion process on their own. If they manage to obtain the god crystals from somewhere, then they could use the insights they gained to invent a makeshift renewable energy source that would last them for as long as the astral winds dominated the skies!

The hunting party took some time to navigate towards the site of the wild god. Vandals and Swordmaidens positioned scouts at a distance, making sure they remained downwind so that the creature wouldn't be able to smell their distinctive metallic scents and spook them off.

"Is that it?" Ketis remarked as the fast transports and mechs halted at least ten kilometers away from the big beast. "For a supposed god, it doesn't look as large as the sacred gods from the footage."

"These creatures grow extremely slow. According to Dr. Tillman, it takes a century or more for them to reach adulthood."

The wild god in question looked smaller and leaner than the fat and bulky sacred gods of Mulak. If Dr. Tillman was right, then this may be a younger adult specimen of its species. Perhaps the reason why it drifted off into the prairie was because it lacked the strength to claim a better territory.

During the time it remained under observation, the wild god mostly slept in the open. Occasionally it woke up to dig a small hole with its formidable rear limbs, only to use it as a makeshift toilet before covering it up with soil.

Other times, it hunted down the herd of animals by moving towards them in an agonizingly slow pace.

Though the wild god appeared to move as fast as a slow turtle, the bison-like creatures didn't move any faster either!

Looking at the footage of the wild god hunting down its prey was like watching a turtle trying to catch up to a snail. Both were slow creatures in their size category, but the wild god possessed an absolute speed advantage because its body and limbs were bigger!

In fact, the wild god didn't particularly exert itself too much whenever it wanted to snack. It merely sniffed the air and homed in on the strong smells of the large herds of animals.

The wild god didn't go too far either. It only nabbed half-a-dozen prey at a time at most, thereby preventing it from driving the animal herds to extinction.

Behavior like this increased everyone's impression that this animal had been engineered somehow.

Ves and the other expert huddled together with Captain Byrd to go over the final plans. They already formed one with the cooperation of the Swordmaidens but they wanted to look over it to see if they made any oversights.

"Have we detected the presence of a second wild god?" Chief Dakkon wondered. "I don't want to find out it has a mate that has stumbled upon us attempting to dissect its deceased partner."

"We're fairly certain the beast is on its own." Dr. Tillman replied. "We've analyzed the terrain extensively and the only traces of a giant beast belongs to this yellow wild god."

The creature in question resembled a feathered dinosaur covered with rich yellow feather interspersed with other patterns. It weighed significantly more than a heavy mech, but not as much as one of the sacred gods.

It never showed any signs of sentience or interaction with the elusive wildlings. The Flagrant Swordmaidens kept their eyes and ears peeled out for the dwarves, but so far they hadn't encountered any. They didn't adhere to the stereotype of miners who loved to claim mineral-rich deposits.

Mining ores didn't fill up their stomachs!

"Has the creature shown any sign of extraordinary abilities?"

"None so far, though that doesn't mean it doesn't have any trump cards." Dr. Tillman cautioned them all. "Our scanners and sensors can't penetrate past its feathery scales. Just like a sacred god, the wild god is emitting a natural

interference field that also has a spacetime distortion component. This alone tells us that they may not be called gods in vain."

In short, they hadn't figured out more than what they already knew a few days ago. Though Captain Byrd wanted to treat the wild god as a potential opponent on par with a sacred god like Naeduis, they couldn't afford to dither all day. Delaying the hunt by a few days wouldn't improve their chances of success.

They just needed to get on with the hunt.

The fast transports remained at the rear while the mechs stepped forward. The Vandals and Swordmaidens both brought two mech companies again. The Vandals brought more ranged mechs this time as they didn't anticipate their melee mechs to play any role.

Even if the wild god moved as slow as a snail, none of them underestimated the creature's burst capabilities! It could perform a quick snap if it wanted to! Taking them out at a distance so far that the mechs would barely be able to remain in visual range sounded like a much safer prospect.

"The Swordmaiden mechs are in position. Our own mechs are in position as well. The wild god is currently asleep and has not shown any indications of detecting our presence. We can commence the attack any any time, captain."

"Begin! Open fire!"

Around sixty laser beams impacted the obviously slumbering wild god! The attack instantly struck its feathered limbs, causing its scales to start vaporizing from the combined firepower of several laser beams pinpointing their targeting on the exact same spot!

Unlike enemy mechs, these wild gods didn't possess any ECM or a form of mobility that allowed them to mess with the targeting of the rifleman mechs.

Even the creature's natural interference field wasn't enough to divert most of the laser beams away from their target spots.

The wild god released a painful roar immediately upon waking. It turned its head towards the limbs and saw that it had acquired a new set of shallow holes on its limbs!

"Fire again!"

A second salvo of lasers struck the previously-hit areas. The wild god roared in agony as most of the scales on those spots succumbed to blindingly bright beams of light that came from the blue!

The wild god swiveled its huge eyes towards the forms in the distance and began to lumber forward in a fury-crazed charge!

Of course, the creature's charge didn't look impressive to the hunters at all. The mechs easily took a few steps backwards in order to maintain a consistent distance between their frail mechs and the wild god's brute strength.

Ves stared at the footage and the sensor readings in rapt attention. He was waiting for something to happen. Was the wild god a simple creature, or did it possess any powers that was worthy of the mantle of a god?

"Energy levels within the beast is spiking!" Chief Dakkon called in alarm.

"Spacetime distortion is strengthening as well!"

"Is it siphoning energy from the astral winds?!"

"Nothing of the sort. The wild god is drawing upon an inner reservoir of energy that we haven't detected before!"

"What is it doing?!"

"I don't know, but the emissions it is generating is spreading out over the terrain! It's similar to the ability shown off by Naeduis, except it doesn't involve the ground water!"

Then what was this wild god up to?

"Our seismic sensors are reading an increasing level of tremors around the wild god! It's calling down an earthquake!"

The prairie soil in a wide area around the wild god trembled and shook! Some of the soil even cracked and split, causing the animals nearby to fall into the chasms that emerged beneath their limbs!

"Are our mechs and transports under threat?" Captain Byrd asked in concern.

"No ma'am! Our assets remain well outside the area of effect. We should only be experiencing some minor shakes at most."

The earthquake lasted around forty seconds before Chief Dakkon reported that the wild god's energy reservoir ran out of juice. Despite the wild god's incredible ferocity, it couldn't do anything to a distant opponent!

The wild god visibly looked exhausted. Unlike the sacred gods, these untamed exobeasts didn't appear to be optimised for war, though that might also be a function of its age.

"I think that's it." Dakkon remarked. "Without any way to supplement its energy quickly, I don't think it can pull off any more tricks."

Ves nodded in agreement as he watched the rifleman mechs disabling its limbs with their focused lasers before turning their firepower onto other sections of its body. Since they didn't expect the wild god to be able to pose a threat to their mechs, the hunters took their time by aiming to immobilize and kill the exobeast while leaving as many parts intact as possible.

"It's interesting that it is able to perform such a trick on its own." Ves observed. "This proves that the godly abilities they showed off doesn't have to involve a beast rider."

The feathered wild god's ability proved that the beast riders didn't bring as much to the table compared to expert pilots.

An expert mech without an expert pilot would never be able to muster up their resonance abilities.

This likely strengthened the impression of the giant exobeasts in the native population.

Speaking of experts, Ves diverted some attention to the performance of the pale dancer. Though it had been built as a customized ballistic rifleman mech, it could still wield laser rifles as long as it forewent some resonance abilities and specialized systems that only worked well with physical rounds.

The Pale Dancer wouldn't be able to employ any devastating tricks like infusing its rounds with penetrating or exploding energy, but Venerable Xie still had his excellent marksmanship to go on. Each of his lasers hit their assigned target without any deviation, even compensating for the minute amount of spacetime distortion that threw everyone's aim slightly off course!

The customized laser rifle in the Pale Dancer's hands barked out laser beams that were at least four times as powerful as the lasers released by normal rifles. No expense had been spared for the weapon which originally served as yet another backup weapon for the overgeared Parallax Star.

"The beast is starting to succumb!"

After more than five minutes of surgical bombardment, the wild god finally showed signs of croaking.

It was a rather ignoble end for such a majestic creature. For some reason, Ves didn't look very impressed at their successful act of deicide.

"They're not really gods, after all." He shook his head in disappointment.

"They're merely mistaken as such."

Chapter 797 Ticking

The wild god appeared just as majestic up close as a sacred god. They possessed the same bulk and formless aura of pressure. Though Dr. Tillman hadn't quite determined if the giant exobeasts consisted of one species with several subraces or multiple species, Ves leaned towards the former.

The wild gods had too much in common despite their somewhat divergent appearances. The diversity of their subraces resembled the diversity of dog breeds throughout the galaxy.

"Wow. This god truly does resemble an organic heavy mech." Ketis uttered with an awed expression. This was her first time she ever came close to one of the exobeasts. "How can they grow so large on a heavy gravity planet?"

"That's what the exobiologists are about to find out." Ves replied while flicking his head over to the exobiologists already starting to take tissue samples of the big brute.

Dr. Tillman and her team practically urged their fast transport to sprint towards the carcass as soon as the Flagrant Swordmaidens confirmed it bought the farm.

Chief Dakkon and score of technicians also started unloading prefab cold chamber parts. In order to preserve the corpse as best as possible, the Vandals planned to envelop the corpse in a giant chamber that lowered the temperature inside.

Of course, the cooks already started picking out their choice cuts of meat. A regular knife wouldn't be able to cut through the hard scales and thick hide, so

they needed the assistance of the Swordmaidens to hack out a few small samples for them to experiment on at their mobile kitchen.

A lot of Vandals and Swordmaidens eagerly tracked the progress of the cooks, finding their work a lot more interesting than the science stuff performed by the exobiologists and other experts.

A small competition emerged as the mech pilots silently jostled for the right to take the first bite. Everyone valued the bragging rights of partaking in the flesh of a god, but the person enjoyed a definite advantage over all the other braggers!

Ves silently shook his head as he witnessed their arguing behind the scenes. They had enough sense to remain alert inside their mechs in case the wild god had a mate or something, but the slight movements betrayed their vigorous arguing.

While the cold chamber slowly took shape, Ves and Ketis stood by the side along with the rest of the gawkers. As mech designers, their expertise left them with little to do. The only reason they tagged along was because they might be relevant if the exobiologists identified anything related to neural interfaces.

Ves had analyzed the previous sensor readings over and over again and couldn't help but conclude that the sacred gods definitely maintained a neural connection with their beast riders!

Whether the beasts accomplished this through an artificial implant or a natural organ, the Flagrant Swordmaidens would soon find out as the exobiologists began to cut the carcass apart.

Because the beast was so unimaginably huge and tough, the exobiologists started enlisting the aid of a Swordmaiden mech. The cutting had to be done

with care and precision, but also with a substantial amount of force because the wild god possessed an immensely tough body.

While the exobiologists were expected to become absorbed in their studies for a couple of days, Ves brought Ketis over to the Pale Dancer, which had stood down from combat.

"That's your expert pilot's old mech, isn't it? It certainly looks the part!" Ketis remarked.

Ves nodded in agreement. The mech oozed quality to any mech designer who possessed a decent set of eyes. "Every part about an expert mech is a pinnacle design. With regular designs, you often have to make compromises in terms of cost due to diminishing returns. With expert mechs, your budget is a lot more generous. If you can improve an expert mech's performance by one percent at the cost of a heavy mech, then most expert mech designers will eagerly accept such a trade."

Ketis threw a glance at Ves as if she couldn't believe a mech designer would be so wasteful to give up an entire expert mech just to squeeze out an extra percentage of performance for a single mech. In most circumstances, the addition of a heavy mech often trumped over a marginal performance boost of a single mech.

Yet this rule didn't apply to expert mechs. These peak performance machines which possessed enough power to slaughter a hundred ordinary mechs in the right conditions didn't actually see that much use in such a fashion. As trump cards, they mostly deployed against other expert mechs.

In these intense clashes which pitted demigods against demigods, the difference a single percentage of performance could make might be able to tip the balance between the two elite mechs!

If a force commander had to make the choice to save a billion credits but lose an expert mech, or spend that billion credits and enable the expert mech to win the clash, most would make the second choice for sure!

This was also the principal reason why expert mechs rarely entered the private sector. Outfits without any backing of a state simply couldn't afford to make such costly tradeoffs and still be able to run a profit.

It was cheaper to raise a hundred regular mechs and provide for their supplies and transportation than to support a single expert mech!

As a ballistic rifleman mech, the Pale Dancer resembled some of his Crystal Lord's design choices by prioritizing speed and mobility while covering up its frame with a thin layer of extravagantly strong compressed armor plating.

The Pale Dancer made use of an armor system that completely surpassed the cost of the Veltrex armor system. Though the actual degree of strengthening wasn't as drastic, it nonetheless allowed the thin and nimble Pale Dancer to shrug off ordinary rifle rounds and laser beams with relative ease, though it fared less well against penetrating attacks such as kinetic projectiles launched by cannons or railguns.

As a custom mech, the mech designer of the Pale Dancer should have invested a lot of their emotions into the machine. Yet whenever Ves came close to the mech, his sixth sense only sensed a diminished sense of restraint, as if this mech's true potential had forcefully been shackled by other priorities.

Ves regaled his speculation concerning its design to Ketis. "Internal politics can be kind of messy. The Senior Mech Designer in the service of the Royal House of Talk had probably received an instruction from another prince to limit the effectiveness of the Pale Dancer. A mech designer can employ hundreds of tricks to sabotage their own designs without making it obvious."

"It must have been rather painful for that Senior to cripple his own design."

"That's why you should never work for nobles or another interest group. They only care about themselves, and never take your interests into consideration."

"What about Mayra and the Swordmaidens?" She frowned. "I can't imagine abandoning them for any reason. They're my sisters!"

"I'm not saying you should discard your bonds. They can be a strength and a reliable form of support for you. There's nothing wrong with respecting the mech designer who raised you, but you shouldn't stand still and do nothing if she ever leads you to the wrong path. Even if you are just a Novice right now, you already possess the qualifications to set out on your own."

Ves tried to ease Ketis into the idea of pursuing her career outside of the Swordmaidens for a while. He always thought she didn't have to remain stuck with the pirate gang for the entirety of her life.

When Mayra passed over a data chip with forged identity documents and gifted him with the Cadisis, Ves started to have a premonition that the future might be a lot more dire than he thought.

Though he didn't know what kind of disaster the Starlight Megalodon had in store for them all, it didn't hurt to prepare.

The more escape plans he arranged, the better his chances of surviving a crisis.

Speaking of plans, Venerable Xie emerged from somewhere and approached Ves with a determined gait.

"Mr. Larkinson."

"Venerable Xie." Ves bowed along with Ketis. Though expert pilots didn't necessarily merit a ritual greeting, it was customary to do so in order to indicate respect. No matter what he had done to the expert pilot's mind, he

still had to observe the forms in front of him. "How has the Pale Dancer performed so far?"

"It is better, though I don't know why." The expert pilot frowned. The man spoke with such force and weight that the mech designers had to resist becoming entranced by his voice. "Some problems persist, particularly when the antigrav field is off. While my mech is strong enough to move under the planet's gravity, its balance profile requires some adjustments."

"I'll put it on the list and work on it now." Ves acknowledged the complaint. "Are there any other problems that require immediate attention?"

The expert pilot mentioned a couple of problems, most of them already known to the Vandals. It took time and ingenuity to solve those problems. Under field conditions, their ability to modify and rework the Pale Dancer received a large truncation. The basic prefab workshops erected at the camp only provided the bare minimum of facilities to service the mechs. More extensive overhauls could only be done back on the combat carriers or logistics ships.

In the meantime, Ketis basically stared at the expert pilot as if she met a hero in the flesh. Everyone possessed a fascination for expert pilots, and very few of them could shake off the hero worship ingrained by society.

Even pirates admired expert pilots!

Of course, Ves long shook off his mindless awe for expert pilots.

Once they finished going over the raft of issues, Ves decided to take a risk and ask about something more personal. "How are you fitting in with the Flagrant Vandals, sir?"

The expert pilot maintained a composed face, revealing little of his emotions. "I am grateful for the Vandals to rescue the remnants of our colonization fleet. A chapter of my life has ended. While the Vandals are far from what I am used

to, they are a fine and courageous folk. Even if they do their duty with plenty of complaints, they don't back off. I admire that courage."

This harkened back to the man's background as a bodyguard for the former Fourth Prince. A cowardly bodyguard didn't exist!

"Have you made any friends?"

The man stared back without making any response. Of course, expert pilots didn't easily mingle with their lessers anymore.

Still, Ves found the lack of any friendly connections to be a tad bit concerning.

Had the tampered neural interfaces succeeded in influencing the expert pilot's mind? As Ves asked a few more casual questions, he couldn't read much from the expert pilot's terse answers.

For an expert pilot who was supposed to be loyal to the Flagrant Vandals, the man did not express that much enthusiasm for his new employer. At some point, Ves started to develop a creeping suspicion.

The mind of an expert pilot was incalculably more firm than that of a regular mech pilot. The main component of their advancement was their strong and unwavering willpower! Though this was an ephemeral quality that couldn't be expressed in numbers, everyone knew that expert pilots had reached a qualitative transformation on this aspect!

The suspicion disturbed Ves to such an extent that he quickly ended the conversation and guided Ketis away from the dangerous man.

"Awww!" She groaned. "Why didn't you introduce me to him? That's the first expert pilot I've seen up close! I wanted to shake his hand!"

Ves sighed. "Try and stay sober in front of expert pilots next time. Not all of them are good people."

And not all of them might be loyal to those they ostensibly served. Though Ves had been unable to obtain any proof of that, his interaction with Venerable Xie was so strange that Ves truly started doubting whether the mental tampering had truly set in. If it turned out that the expert pilot resisted the brainwashing, then the Vandals had a ticking time bomb on their hands!

Chapter 798 Big Mistake

His realization concerning Venerable Xie's questionable loyalties spoiled his good mood. While the rest of the Flagrant Swordmaidens got caught up in a festive mood after killing the wild god, Ves lacked the interest to join the festive mood.

He instead spent his time on reviewing the Pale Dancer's performance logs. Unfortunately, his knowledge regarding neural interfaces and their effects on their pilots was too shallow for him to make any definite conclusions. Only a true specialist would be able to make sense of all the incomprehensible data.

"What a fine situation we're in." He sighed.

Right now, Ves started to think that accepting Major Verle's request may have been a huge mistake. The Fourth Prince died through no fault of their own, so if they fessed up to Venerable Xie, the expert pilot might have forgiven the Vandals for failing to protect the expert pilot's former employer.

Yet instead of opting for honesty, Major Verle instead insisted on deceiving the expert pilot with an AI that took the place of the deceased foreign prince. Such a solution would only work for a couple of days, therefore Ves had to implement a more permanent solution by tampering with the neural interfaces.

Recently, Ves contemplated the nature of the neural interface and its importance to mechs throughout the galaxy. Neural interface technology wasn't anything new, and existed long before the advent of the Age of Mechs.

The tech's implementation had been a lot more cruder back then, and researchers didn't understand too much about them. Only through the popularization of mechs did the study of neural interfaces advance past its rudimentary, neglected stage and matured into a safe and reliable product as long as they didn't go off the rails.

Ves had very much deliberately steered Venerable Xie's neural interfaces off the rails with his tampering. He had always thought that he succeeded, but now he wondered if the expert pilot kept his mind firmly on the rails through his sheer force of will.

He really shouldn't underestimate the metaphysical strength of an expert pilot's mind! Warriors beyond compare, expert pilots exhibited so much mental strength that their minds could process multiple times more input from a mech than an advanced pilot!

If someone like Venerable O'Callahan or Venerable Xie fought in the Redemption Duel held by the Church of Haatumak, then their nervous systems would have easily been capable of bearing the load of all of the raw input of data. Their nerves would definitely strain a little, but their minds had already taken on some of the traits of artificial processors, so they possessed the capability to filter and discard junk data before they flooded their minds.

This capability to withstand and resist harmful data applied to every kind of input. If the expert pilot suspected what went on, then it wasn't out of the blue for him to resist active brainwashing!

It wasn't as if expert pilots had never been brainwashed before, but the difficulties involved in making sure the new directives had set in required a lot of effort.

The tampering that Ves had rushed through mainly consisted of pirating old programming from the Farund Affair from a textbook. While he was pretty sure

the code was authentic, the mechs sold by Farund Inc. back then all consisted of mass-market products.

None of the tampered neural interfaces the infamous mech manufacturer had included in their products ever aimed at expert pilots.

Expert pilots deserved special treatment. This applied to every aspect. Employers needed to spend lavishly on them. Enemies needed to sacrifice hundreds of mechs or send out their own trump card to stop them in battle. Mech designers had to tailor their expert mechs to their heightened capabilities.

It was that last point where Ves made a critical oversight. He applied a standard, mass-market solution to a problem that actually demanded the VIP treatment.

This was like serving the contents of a nutrient pack to a diner in a high-class restaurant!

"Damnit! I made a big mistake!"

Though he lacked definite proof, his dread only increased as his certainty became stronger. Perhaps Venerable Xie had maintained his clarity throughout this entire time, but acted dumb because he had no other choice!

"That's right." He calmed himself a bit. "No matter what grudge he has with us, for the time being we're both on the same boat."

If Venerable Xie possessed any survival instincts at all, then he wouldn't deliberately sabotage the mission.

If he raised a stink right now, he'd only be able to devastate the Flagrant Swordmaidens. What then? Remain stranded on the surface? Who would service his Pale Dancer and supply it with new energy cells? Even expert

pilots didn't enjoy spending the rest of their lives under the influence of heavy gravity!

Perhaps he might be able to seek asylum with the natives, but what did they know about mechs? The thought of devolving into a savage whose mech quickly broke down from lack of maintenance probably didn't appeal to the expert pilot who spent most of his life in civilized space.

Only by completing the mission would the Flagrant Vandals pick him up from the surface and bring him out of the Aeon Corona System.

Once the fleet returned to the near frontier or crossed back into civilized space would the expert pilot be able to exact his revenge and make it out alive!

"Still, that's something I would do if faced with the same choice. That doesn't mean someone else will follow the same steps."

Ves had experienced many stupid and crazy decision-making in his career so far. The incident which struck him the most was the time he visited Mancroft Station and encountered lots of trouble because many pirate crewmembers squandered all of their life savings by betting on the wrong champion in a hyped-up arena duel!

Humans were emotional creatures who made decisions based on other factors besides their rational self-interests. Ves wasn't exempt from this human condition either.

He developed a second scenario in his mind. If Venerable Xie wanted to screw the Flagrant Vandals at the most inopportune time, then the moment to do so would be when they reached the Starlight Megalodon!

Not only would the betrayal make the Vandals vulnerable to their competitors, the expert would also be able to claim some of the spoils from the derelict battleship for himself. If he was lucky, he might also be able to defect to one of

the other competitors that took part in the race to secure the Starlight Megalodon's bounty.

In any case, the longer this situation persisted, the greater the risk this might all blow up in their faces.

The main problem right now was that Ves couldn't confide in anyone about this problem! Major Verle should be the only person who knew what Ves had attempted to do, but the highest-ranking Vandal in the System was currently stuck with the fleet far above their heads.

Ves did not dare to relay a message to Major Verle. He couldn't confide in Captain Byrd either. Even if Ves believed she might be a part of the same Firestarters crew as Major Verle, some secrets shouldn't be spread around.

This was a problem that Ves had to address on his own. He started to contemplate certain alternatives.

Should he implement a killswitch on the mech? The more thought of it pained his design philosophy. Doing so directly contradicted his core principles regarding mech design. He already abused his design philosophy a short time before.

"I'll think of something. There is still some time."

As Ves turned his attention back to the Pale Dancer's design. An entire day passed while the exobiologists went to town on the wild god carcass. Nothing much happened during the intervening time, though the cooks impatiently waited for the exobiologists to declare the meat to be safe for consumption.

The clamoring for wild god barbecue grew ever wilder! If the exobiologists didn't make the pronouncement soon, the mech pilots would probably revolt and forcefully break into the cold chamber to appropriate the mountains of meat for themselves!

At some time, a Vandal security officer approached him and interrupted his work.

"Mr. Larkinson, Dr. Tillman has requested your presence in order to assist her with one of her findings. Please follow me to the cold chamber."

"Lead the way." Ves replied with an uncertain frown.

The exobiologist wouldn't involve a mech designer without a reason. Curious to why the exobiologist wanted him to be present, he eagerly followed after the security officer. Ketis silently followed along.

It wasn't as if their research on the wild god wouldn't be shared with the Swordmaidens anyway. The pirates exhibited just as much curiosity about the nature of the wild gods as everyone else.

Once the three passed through a rudimentary identity check, they entered the cold chamber and got hit by a blast of cold air. Their combat armor immediately unfolded their integrated helmets in order to protect their wearers from the chill.

"It's not that cold here." Ketis muttered and reversed the setting of her suit, causing her helmet to retract again. "It's only a couple of degrees below Celsius here."

Ves followed suit. He could take much more than a minor chill. "It just needs to be cold enough here to stall the decomposition of the carcass. Freezing this place any further will waste a lot of energy."

The carcass looked a lot more different than before. The Swordmaiden mech employed as an impromptu butcher had methodically cut through the carcass and retrieved many organs and other tissue samples to be loaded into frozen containers.

As the security officer led Ves and Ketis up to a ramp which maintained a commanding view over the increasingly diminishing carcass, Dr. Tillman immediately dragged them to a nearby console.

"So doc, have you figured out whether someone tampered with these exobeasts?"

"They're not natural." Dr. Tillman declared with a serious expression. "We've gathered fairly conclusive evidence that other exobiologists have engineered the wild god's genome. We've determined that it used to be a native species on this planet, but received so many genetic enhancements that it's clear to us that it's an engineered species."

"You mean someone designed these exobeast species to fulfill a specific role?"

"Exactly so. They are not a product of nature. Not only do these species lack any limiters on their body growth, they also contain many modifications that allow them to survive an Earth-like atmosphere while enhancing their metabolism so that they can digest Earth-derived foods. And these are only the basic tweaks."

The doctor opened up a research report that listed all of the changes she found so far. Practically every organ had been tampered with! In fact, their brains received the most extensive modifications by far!

"We have identified many new and unknown structures within the exobeast's brains that are definitely not the product of nature. The exobiologists have deliberately aimed to impose these changes on their brains. The problem is that we can't identify most of their functions."

"Do you know what the purpose is for all of these modifications? Why bother with modifying them? What makes a wild god different from its original species?"

If someone engineered this species, then they had to have a purpose in mind. It was the same as designing a mech. Nobody designed them out of a whim!

"We don't know for certain why they are engineered in this way, but there is one section of the brains that stands out to us. Please look at this protruding brain matter that is extending upwards.

The projector displayed a three-dimensional model of the exobeast's brains. Different from the brains of most other humans and beasts, a very distinct fork-like shape stood out. It was as if someone stuck a fork into someone's brains!

Of course, the shape only resembled a fork. In fact, its structure was a lot more complex than that once the projection zoomed in. Ves studied the model and flicked through the raw footage of this organ's appearance.

After three minutes of study, he came to a definite conclusion about this organ's purpose.

"It's different to see it in an organic form, but there's no doubt about it. This organ is a neural interface!"

An organic neural interface! Someone had actually managed to incorporate such a complex system into the genes of an exobeast. This meant that any mech pilot could potentially 'pilot' a wild god!

This only strengthened his impression that some exobiologists had designed these species to replace the role of mechs on this planet!

Chapter 799 Grown Mechs

Someone engineered an exobeast species that could replace the role of mechs!

There had to be a reason for this effort! Both Ves and Dr. Tillman determined that the wild god's genome had been a product of a cross-disciplinary team that consisted of both mech designers and exobiologists.

Those professions ordinarily never came into contact with each other. Their fields of expertise almost never intersected with each other.

In the rare cases that they did, their combined efforts usually produced atrocities such as organic mechs!

In a way, the god species of Aeon Corona VIII should be an offshoot to the early research to design an organic mech. Instead of starting from scratch and attempt to create a perverse form of life from nothing, the exobiologists and mech designers who presumably survived the Starlight Megalodon's crash had taken an existing species and messed with their genes so much that they didn't resemble their predecessors at all!

What Dr. Tillman couldn't wrap her head around was why the exobiologists and mech designers would be so bored to make such an effort. "It takes a lot of research, experimentation and iteration to implement so many modifications. The larger the species, the more resources and time you need to make sure the modifications haven't resulted in any adverse effects."

Ves couldn't supply her with any answers. Other than guesses, they had nothing to go on. All they knew was that it took decades to perfect the modifications. The god species that emerged from the fruit of their labor eventually went on to spread across the planet as the absolute apex predators of the changing ecosystem.

The engineered exobeasts dominated to such an extent that they even prevented the human descendants from taking over the entire planet!

The god species as well as the blessed and cursed people all came about through the intervention of the exobiologists stationed on the Starlight Megalodon. Over thousands of years of degeneration and decay, only their work withstood the test of time.

Where were the mechs?

Why hadn't the blessed people maintained the technological standards of their forefathers?

Why did the blessed people get to rule over the city while the cursed people had to fend for themselves in the wild?

All of these consequences sounded like a mad scientist's dream. It was as if the exobiologists who survived the crash worked for the Five Scrolls Compact instead of the CFA!

Ves could never imagine the sober scientists and researchers in the employ of one of the Big Two to be so unrestrained.

The worst part was that the captain or the admiral aboard the battleship must have approved such a drastic intervention. The exobiologists and mech designers could have never completed such a massive project without the full support of the rest of the survivors.

As Ves tentatively identified all of the aspects about the exobeast's biology related to mech design, it became clear that the wild god had been explicitly designed to facilitate control.

One strange gap in the center of the brains puzzled him however. "I don't know much about the brains, but shouldn't there something be inside this cavity?"

"About that.." Dr. Tillman said as she adopted a careful expression. "We've encountered the means to which a wild god supplied the energy to call down those tremors."

The doctor switched the projection to an image captured as a handful of men in hazard suits retrieved a murky crystal the size of a human child from the giant brains.

"Is that one of those fancy god crystals!?" Ketis uttered from behind.

Tillman shook her head. "Not quite. It's an inferior copy of the so-called god crystals. Chief Dakkon is researching it right now at the mobile labs, but so far we've been able to determine that it is a lot cruder than the god crystals embedded into the hides of the sacred gods. As far as we know, it doesn't have the ability to call down an energy tornado, nor is it able to store any pure higher-dimensional energies."

"Then what is it?" Ves asked.

"As far as we can tell, it stores an intermediary form of energy derived from the higher-dimensional energies when they devolve into something simpler when they spill over into the material dimensions. It's the process of accumulation that is particularly interesting."

"How so, doctor?"

"Chief Dakkon and I developed a theory about this as soon as we identified the properties of the murky crystals as we are referring them to. While the higher-dimensional energies are largely contained in the astral winds that blow at least a hundred kilometers over the surface of the planet, a miniscule amount of spillage still occurs. Nothing is ever perfect, and even the astral winds deviate from the rule from time to time."

"You believe that the higher-dimensional energy that escapes from the astral winds devolves into a lesser form of energy once it descends on the planet?"

"Exactly. More than that, the native wildlife is somehow capable of absorbing them into their bodies. The energy slowly lands on the grass, which gets grazed by herbivores. Those herbivores gets eaten by predators, who continue to eat prey who are contaminating with a miniscule amount of intermediary energy. The predators continue to accumulate more of this contaminant as time goes on until they die and get eaten by other predators."

What Dr. Tillman described was the process of bioaccumulation of substances. Even if the astral winds only release a minute amount of intermediate energy, they eventually concentrate into greater amounts as the plants and animals get eaten by other animals.

"And in this engineered ecosystem, the god species sit at the top of the food chain." Ves stated. "These wild gods and sacred gods grow so large and live such long lives that they are probably able to accumulate a scary amount of intermediate energy!"

Dr. Tillman mentioned another revelation. "The murky crystals themselves aren't exactly mundane either. According to Chief Dakkon, the crystals themselves are formed from intermediate energy! This is why we're experiencing many difficulties in analyzing them. Our equipment and scanners aren't able to cope with something so advanced!"

Both Ves and Ketis widened their eyes. They knew the implications of this revelation. Energy and mass were related to each other. In the right circumstances, mass turned into energy and vica versa. However, such a transformation often came pared with a huge release or consumption of energy!

The most typical example of this phenomenon was the ubiquitous nuclear weapon. Both nuclear fission and nuclear fusion involved tiny reactions that released a tiny amount of energy.

Their destructiveness came from the fact that such a reaction happened so many times at the same time that the tiny bit of energy being released built up to an enormous explosion!

Therefore, any phenomena that involved mass turning into energy or vica versa had to be handled with care.

Right now, Ves honed in on the fact that if the process of forming the murky crystals could be reversed. The Flagrant Swordmaidens might be able to solve their energy shortages in that case!

"Do you know if the murky crystals can be used as a source of energy?"

The exobiologist shrugged. "You'll have to ask Chief Dakkon for that. As far as I'm aware of, the murky crystals aren't very good at their jobs. They're filled with impurities that hamper their function."

Ves planned to do so later. Right now, he wanted to discuss the implications of discovering some mech-like traits in the carcass of the wild god. The influence of mech designers was actually fairly slight except for the inclusion of a biological neural interface. Incorporating this growth was so blatant that the exobeast's skull developed a deformity in order to accommodate this growth!

It was Dr. Tillman's turn to ask a question this time. "This isn't my field of expertise, but do you think that a mech pilot will be able to interface with a wild god without complications?"

"I'm barely knowledgeable about neural interfaces and neurology myself, so I can't answer that question. I do think that it would be reckless for a mech pilot to attempt an interface with a feral beast, especially if we annoyed it by taking it into captivity or something."

"Why do you believe this is the case? Haven't the natives managed to do so successfully?"

"Yes, but the blessed people have established a bond with those creatures. A wild god on the other hand is a wild beast that is certainly antagonistic to strange organisms like us. Have you ever heard about what has happened when neural interface technology initially came into being?"

The doctor grimaced. "Far too many accidents occurred. Many participants incurred permanent brain damage."

"It's not until fairly recently that our researchers refined the technology to the point where it's somewhat safe to interface with an animal mind. Before that, most attempts at connecting the mind of a human to the mind of an animal ended in failure. The few success stories happened when the animal in question is a loyal family dog or the like. Both of their minds needed to be in sync to some degree for the procedure to be safe."

"I've heard of this!" Ketis chirped from the background. "They say that some crazy dog enthusiast tried to overwrite the consciousness of his pet dog with his own mind! They never told us whether the procedure succeeded, but the authorities quickly came and shut the entire place down."

"Yes.. that happened a long time ago." Ves pressed his lips. "The final result was probably so gruesome that the authorities don't dare to publish the results. In any case, these incidents show that interfacing with the mind of an animal is a hugely risky affair. I'd say that the organic interface that has grown inside the heads of these exobeasts makes the process possible without employing any complicated machines. However, they probably don't do anything to reduce the inherent risks of such a procedure."

He would absolutely not agree to any experiment to let a mech pilot ride on the back of a random exobeast and attempt to interface his mind with it. The outcome wouldn't be any different from the countless failures and horror stories that littered the past.

Even if the natives managed to succeed in their attempts, the Flagrant Swordmaidens should at least learn how they managed to do so safely before making their own attempts.

After a couple of hour's worth of discussion, Ves and Ketis finally departed from the cold chamber. His expertise wouldn't be needed to analyze the rest of the wild god's carcass.

The mood outside had become a lot more cheerful during this time. The smell of charred meat started to proliferate in the air.

The barbecue had begun! The exobiologists finally pronounced some portions of meat to be safe for consumption!

Though the scientists declared that they weren't completely sure if eating the meat would harm their bodies or lead to any unintentional reactions, none of the Vandals and Swordmaidens cared.

All they wanted now was meat!

"C'mon, you've been cooking the same strip of meat for more than an hour now! Is it done yet?!" A Vandal yelled.

"Hold your horses, already!" An angry cook replied. "We're heating them as fast as we can, but this meat is resistant to heat! It takes a while to cook the insides thoroughly!"

An impatient Swordmaiden couldn't help but retort. "Who cares about that! I've eaten hundreds of exobeasts raw! My genetically-modified stomach can digest nearly anything!"

Under the exhortation of the Swordmaidens, the cooks buckled under the pressure and served a slightly underdone piece of god steak to the winner of the invisible competition.

From what Ves could gather from the men, Captain Orfan and Lieutenant Dise both claimed that they should be the ones who deserved to take the first bite.

Predictably, they hadn't been able to come to an agreement.

Captain Orfan may have won her duel against Naeduis, but the sacred god hadn't exactly been the most stellar opponent.

Lieutenant Dise at least had the honor of surviving a duel against the Tyrant of the Wastes, an exobeast so powerful that its dreadful lightning abilities match those of an ace mech!

The two decided to resolve their argument in the simplest method possible: by stepping into the sparring ring and slugging it out against each other!

Predictably, the Swordmaiden officer won.

Once she took the very first bite, the Swordmaidens cheered while the Vandals sulked. Captain Orfan had to make do with the honor of taking the second bite.

That day, almost everyone filled their bellies to their heart's content.

Chapter 800 Bleeding Energy

The hunting party eventually packed up their stuff and made their way back to the camp. Each meal they ate during the travels incorporated wild god meat to a degree. The carnivorous Vandals and Swordmaidens insisted on eating it with every meal while it lasted!

Once the cooks became accustomed to working with the tough and heat-resistant meat, they began to get creative with their recipes. The menu began to include items such as god meat hot dogs, god meat curry, god meat cheeseburgers and god meat filet mignon.

Some of the more adventurous Swordmaidens even ate the meat raw or in the form of sushi.

The only ones who didn't participate consisted of a handful of vegetarians and those with belief and dietary concerns. The Vandals took in all kinds of people, even those who should have belonged to other states.

Most people happily munched on the god meat every chance they got though. Nobody got tired of the taste of god meat. Chewy, filling and suffused with fat, the taste of meat from a creature that was hundreds of years old truly satiated their stomachs in a way that fake meat synthesized from nutrient packs could never match.

"We should turn Seven into a farm and rear these wild gods for the slaughter!"

"It's not worth the effort, idiot. It takes a hundred years for a wild god to grow to this size."

"Eh, haven't you forgotten about the timespace stuff? Time runs more than ten times faster on this planet!"

"That won't last forever! All of this crap is only happening because someone forgot to turn off the Starlight Megalodon's FTL drive when they left!"

When the hunting arrived back to the camp, Ves heard that the ancient city of Mulak eventually opened up to a substantial trade.

One of the ways the negotiators used to put some pressure on the city was to show them footage of their successful attempt at slaying one of the dreaded wild god at a distance.

Though the strength of a wild god without a beast rider paled in comparison to a sacred god, both creatures suffered from the same fatal flaw. If the Flagrant Swordmaidens ever came into hostilities with the sacred gods at Mulak, then they wouldn't be able to resist, because their lack of mobility and ranged firepower completely turned them into sitting ducks!

Though the Swordmaidens heavily favored melee mechs, they hadn't completely sworn off the use of rifleman mechs themselves because they faced many situations where a monopoly on ranged superiority proved decisive.

Besides, even if their rivals attempted to take advantage of their lack of ranged firepower, they would quickly find out that the Swordmaiden melee mechs made up for it by closing in quickly with the help of their superior mobility!

The wild gods and sacred gods completely lacked this capability. Perhaps the only sacred god that could inflict some losses to the mechs was Hokaz. The Tyrant of the Wastes possessed a formidable range with his lightning powers, but the problem was that the lightning storm only covered so much ground.

As long as the mechs dispersed and surrounded the city from all directions, even the king of the gods wouldn't be able to clean them all up. The sacred gods who plodded along for several days in indecision and willful ignorance began to realize that these strangers from beyond the vault of the gods might not take no for an answer.

Burying their heads in the sand wouldn't make the looming threat go away.

In fact, the Vandals possessed the ability to destroy the city of Mulak at an even further range than that. Having witnessed a small taste of the might in the hands of the ace mech-like Hokaz, the Vandals came up with a means to bombard the city of Mulak from a distance to break their will.

Though orbital bombardment from the fleet wasn't too feasible due to the tendency of the astral winds diverting all of the artificial meteorites off course, the Vandals could still construct a makeshift artillery cannon and have it fire shells so powerful that they flew far despite the influence of six times standard gravity!

Still, the Vandals would rather not resort to this means. They wanted to conclude a quick and painless trade so that they could quickly get moving. There was no point in trying to subjugate Mulak, and as descendants of

spacers in the service of the CFA, they enjoyed a lot of rights, even if they seemed to have forgotten their roots!

Therefore, from what Ves had heard, Commander Lydia took charge of the negotiations herself and lightly coerced the ancient city into agreeing to a substantial trade.

It could have backfired on her. For all the threats she induced, the Flagrant Swordmaidens actually had no intention of following through with them. It was all smoke and mirrors in an attempt to bewilder the natives into choosing the least-bad options of placating the outsiders.

All of this happened over a span of a few days. Ves didn't particularly care about the methods, though he admired Commander Lydia's savvy. She exerted just enough pressure to force the city to acquiesce, but not enough to set off their pride and provoke repulsion.

"So what's the trade deal?" Ves asked Ketis.

"According to Mayra, we agreed to repair some of their ancient broken-down machinery. We're also supplying them with basic power reactors, antigrav modules, food synthesizers, water purifiers, luxury food stock as well as a library's worth of basic handbooks and manuals related to agriculture and mechanics."

"Sounds like a good mix of short-term and long-term benefits. Mulak will definitely be able to soar with these goods."

None of the items Ketis mentioned sounded particularly valuable to Ves. Their 3D printers could easily fabricate them from extremely basic materials such as iron, copper, titanium and the like. Their designs were so obsolete that even Ves could cobble them together by hand if need be.

Naturally, the yokals wouldn't be able to tell the difference. To them, all of these gifts had been machined so precisely that only a god of craftsmanship could build such divine products!

Ketis snorted contemptuously at the amazed natives. "In exchange for goods that's worth as much as a cheap third-hand mech, they've agreed to trade us with knowledge in the form of lore and history about the ancient cities, the wildlings, the wild gods, the godlings and some other stuff like that. However, their biggest concession by far is that they finally agreed to hand over a pure god crystal!"

"They really gave up on one?!" Ves looked amazed.

While the natives and the sacred gods didn't really care about sharing their folklore, they had always been extremely stubborn about the idea of trading away a god crystal.

These valuable crystallizations of higher-dimensional energies directly represented strength to the sacred gods! According to the lore the Flagrant Swordmaidens had already obtained, as long as they implanted them to one of their godling offspring, that creature would have a straight path to becoming a sacred god!

While it was possible for a wild god to be turned into a sacred god, the cost in god crystals made that expenditure too costly to contemplate.

A full-sized god crystal could be broken up into smaller pieces and be embedded into the hide of a newborn godling offspring. As the exobeast slowly grew, accumulated a bunch of intermediate energy through their diet, and through some unknown means contributed to the growth of the crystals implanted in their bodies.

This was in fact one of the main ways to create new god crystals! For some reason, calling down an energy tornado only filled the god crystals with

higher-dimensional energy. However, this energy was extremely potent and unstable at their purest forms, so the sacred gods needed to make use of it quickly before their god crystals cracked!

"Maybe this is one of the main purposes of why the exobiologists engineered these god species." Ves speculated. "Maybe they tried and failed to interact with the astral winds through purely technological means. I don't know how they came across the so-called god crystals and how they thought that implanting them onto exobeasts was a good idea, but evidently it worked."

The successful trade with the natives had parted some of the mysteries of Aeon Corona VII's past! Now that they obtained another piece of the puzzle, the Flagrant Swordmaidens finally obtained some bit of hope of solving their energy budget deficit.

"Mayra told me that we're about to move out soon. Since we successfully completed the trade, we won't be able to squeeze anything more out of the city without spoiling our relations with them. It's much better to try our luck with other cities."

The natives of Mulak only traded away a single god crystal. While its potential was potentially infinite, they would rather have more.

"There's a handful of ancient cities along our route that may also be open to trade. Even if they aren't willing to hand out a god crystal, perhaps we can obtain some other goods from them instead." Ves mused.

In any case, the order had been given. Everyone needed to be ready to move out!

In the following couple of days, the support personnel rushed into action, eager to get a move on now that Captain Byrd. Mech technicians quickly serviced the mechs and performed some final tweaks, while machinists and other technicians constructed a considerable amount of legged transports.

Finally, the day had come. The Flagrant Swordmaidens tore down the camp and packed up the prefab structures onto the newly-constructed legged transports.

Only a handful consisted of the fast transports that could keep up with a mech on a jog. The majority instead consisted of heavy transports that possessed a much larger cargo capacity as well as stronger legs.

Due to design and energy constraints, Chief Dakkon didn't bother with incorporating antigrav modules onto the heavy transports. Even if they lightened up their weight, their means of locomotion emphasized power over speed. It couldn't move any faster even if it walked on the surface of the moon with only a sixth of the gravity of Old Earth.

When the legged transports started to walk, they did so at a crawl. Their six heavy legs moved up and down with considerable weight. Each time they dragged themselves forward, they used up a large amount of energy.

Ves looked at the hundreds of mechs and the scores of heavy transports and winced at the energy expenditure of it all. The periodic energy cells shipped from orbit helped stem the bleeding, but eventually the ground forces needed to come up with a way to generate their own portable energy source.

Conventional means wouldn't work in their case. The Vandals had already started building some energy generators that used up locally-sourced reactants that they dug up from the soil, but feeding the collective appetite of five-hundred mechs along with fifty legged transports that each bore a massive amount of cargo simply burned through their energy reserves like nothing else!

The Flagrant Swordmaidens pinned all of their hopes on unlocking the secrets of the god crystals.

At one of the heavy transports converted into a mobile lab, Ves and Ketis had come to take a visit. Chief Dakkon led a research team of science officers and experts in charge of figuring out how to make use of their new treasure. Right now, Ves stepped inside an observation chamber that separated the occupants from a highly isolated vault that contained the god crystal.

Nobody knew for sure if it was safe to come into close proximity to the crystal. Though the natives didn't show any fear, that didn't mean that other people would remain unharmed.

For now, the research had only reached a preliminary stage.

"What did you find out, chief?"

"Nothing much, Ves." The chief engineer shrugged. "The crystal isn't anything biological, so at least we don't have to call upon the exobiologists. Dr. Tillman took one good look at it before she returned to the biolabs to poke at her wild god tissue samples. Still, we found out several details after we compared the murky crystal we dug out of the wild god's brains with this purer god crystal that we obtained from the city."

"Well?"

"They react with each other."