

Chapter 801 Stuttering Hal

"Does that mean we can purify the murky crystal?"

"Nothing so good, sadly." Chief Dakkon regretfully shook his head. "When we put the murky crystal close to the god crystal, the two began to react, but not in a good way. The murky crystal did indeed begin to lose some of its cloudiness, but some portions of the god crystal started to become murky! We had to separate the two crystals immediately before this reaction ruined our god crystal!"

In other words, it was like mixing hot water with cold water. If you mixed them together, what resulted was two portions of lukewarm water.

If the Flagrant Swordmaidens wanted to create hot water, then ending up with more water that was significantly colder would be taking a step backwards.

They didn't want the water to grow cold! They wanted to heat all of the water up so that they would all be uniformly hot!

Still, if nothing else, this unanticipated reaction proved that the two kinds of crystals shared a strong relation. "Well, it sounds like there's not much use in hunting wild gods for their murky crystals. All the Vandals and Swordmaidens hoping that we continue to hunt them down so that we can enjoy an endless supply of god meat during supper will doubtlessly be disappointed."

It took a significant amount of effort to hunt down the wild gods and transport tons of their flesh. The Flagrant Swordmaidens already filled the cargo holds of their transports with containers filled with nutrient packs. This efficient food source carried the most nutrients in the least amount of space.

Even though it seemed like wild gods provided a lot of meat, they didn't provide all the necessary nutrients to keep a human body in peak condition, and took up a lot more space for the calories they provided.

Nothing beat the efficiency of nutrient packs. They were the undisputed kings of survival food and military rations!

As Chief Dakkon regaled Ves of his team's initial research results, it became clear that they didn't really understand anything about the strange crystals.

"No matter if it's the murky crystal or the god crystal, both of them consist of matter that we've never seen before. It's completely different from any exotic I've come in touch!" The older man vented his frustration. "We don't even have the right equipment in this mobile lab to study the crystal. Captain Byrd is hounding me behind my back to produce results, but it's not as if I'm a researcher who specializes in higher-dimensional matter and energy!"

Mech regiments like the Flagrant Vandals hired plenty of science officers and experts, but none of them possessed the acumen of a dedicated researcher. Those smart enough to be hired as professors would never join the military and participate in dangerous missions!

Therefore, the research capacity of the ground forces was a lot less impressive than everyone thought. Especially with regards to something as complex as the god crystal, not even the experienced Chief Dakkon or the extremely knowledgeable Ves could make sense of the darn thing!

Ketis surprisingly showed them a different way of getting what they wanted. "You know, I bet the natives know a thing or two about the god crystals. Haven't they successfully made use of them in their own way? Why bother figuring this stuff yourself when we can just borrow someone else's expertise?"

"That's right." A light shone in the chief engineer's eyes. "Wracking our heads over this stuff will take decades to learn anything substantial. It's a lot easier if the natives point us in the right direction!"

It was the same approach the Swordmaidens took when they lacked technical expertise to run their ships or service their mechs. Rather than force the battle-hungry Swordmaidens to do all of that boring stuff themselves, why not capture some experts and enslave them in doing their dirty chores?

Though relying on external experts came with a lot of caveats, it provided a lot more convenience to the Flagrant Swordmaidens. They desperately needed to figure out the application of the god crystals quickly if they wanted to obtain a solution to their energy deficit problems.

If not, their progress would stall half-way!

As they traveled closer and closer to the Starlight Megalodon, the spacetime distortion in the skies above grew stronger, eventually cutting the ground forces off from their vital supply line to the fleet in orbit.

By then, if they hadn't come up with a solution, the Flagrant Swordmaidens would have to rely on their meager generators to replenish their energy cells, all of which would only provide them with enough energy to progress just ten kilometers a day or something!

"We should bring up this course of action to Captain Byrd and Commander Lydia if they haven't already thought of it." Ves suggested. "According to our route, our next stop is to brush past the ancient city of Samar."

"Good idea. We've already used up our goodwill with Mulak. As long as we impress the natives at Samar, we'll be able to rip them off the same way."

One of the pieces of lore the Flagrant Swordmaidens obtained from Mulak was a very badly drawn map of the nearby terrain and cities.

The map showed obvious disparities with the footage captured from orbit, but at least it let the ground forces identify the cities in the vicinity.

The ancient city of Samar sat in the middle of a much more fertile region. Larger and more prosperous than Mulak, the city also used to function as a center of industry.

Though the natives of Mulak believed that none of the old factories and machines worked anymore, the Flagrant Swordmaidens didn't entirely believe that claim. Perhaps the technological decline had struck Mulak the most because it was only meant to serve as a resource extraction hub.

If any city understood the importance of technology, then Samar should definitely be one of the enlightened places on the planet.

On the other hand, if the level of technology at Samar resembled the general ignorance of Mulak, then this phenomenon could no longer be explained by natural means!

Such a large scale decline and stagnation simply didn't fit with the human drive for progress!

Nobody knew why the blessed people hadn't been able to maintain even a rudimentary modern technological standard, but Ves didn't rule out a conspiracy. It was too ridiculous that humans willingly gave up the benefits of technology to live their lives as if they lived in the past!

Ves and Ketis left the mobile lab and returned to a heavy transport that had been fashioned into an extremely cramped mech workshop.

While none of the mech technicians found it easy to service a mech on a moving platform, they had no other choice. With so many mechs on the field, a handful of mechs broke down from time to time due to the challenging conditions.

The gravitic backpacks the Vandals sourced from Harkensen I continually fought against the planet's gravity at close to their maximum capacity. If the planet's gravity was only five g's instead of six g's, the gravitic backpacks

faced a lot less strain as they worked substantially below their maximum power. They'd last at least twice as long in those conditions.

Sadly, neither the Vandals or Swordmaidens had any other recourse. Both the backpacks and the mechs themselves all endured heavy strain whether they were under the influence of an antigrav field or not. Even at rest, the heavy gravity continued to pull at the more vulnerable components.

Even their transports and some of the goods they carried within suffered from the adverse effects of heavy gravity. Though Chief Dakkon did his best to make the heavy transports as rugged as possible, nothing could prevent them from suffering minor breakdowns that nonetheless forced the transport to halt in order to fix the issue.

"If this is what all machines have to go through, no wonder the natives abandoned technology." Ketis complained as their supply caravan forcefully halted yet again. Captain Byrd didn't dare to leave a broken transport behind. "The amount of breakdowns that is happening ever since we landed on this planet is far too much. How can anyone tolerate these conditions?"

Due to the overly-frequent breakdowns, Chief Dakkon diverted some of his valuable time by trying to figure out the root of the problems.

He found out that most of the breakdowns involved moving parts. During an emergency meeting with Captain Byrd and a number of engineers and experts, the chief engineer announced the cause of the problem.

"The root issue of our mechanical problems is the spacetime distortion that we're subjected to." He stated with certainty. "The astral winds that are blowing above our heads isn't entirely uniform. It's just like wind in that way. It curls, it weakens, it strengthens, it curls up on itself and more. This turbulence in turn affects the spacetime distortion on the surface of Seven."

"How bad is the effects of this turbulence?" Ves asked, already frowning because mechs involved a significant amount of moving parts. Though the tolerance of most of their landbound mechs should be quite good, a large deviation might cause a mech to destroy its own leg during a routine march!

Chief Dakkon didn't have good news for the people present in the meeting. "At the micro level, time might speed up or slow down by a couple of milliseconds. Space might stretch or shrink by a couple of millimeters. If it happens once every once in a while, then our machines can still handle the deviations. However, once the astral winds above our heads become exceptionally turbulent or violent, the chance of breakdowns increases by as much as five-thousand percent!"

Such a humongous increase basically meant that it was assured that one of their mechs or transports would suffer a malfunction at least once every standard day!

Fixing these issues slowed down their forward progress and consumed their supplies dedicated for repairs. For all of their sakes, they better find a solution quickly or be driven mad by an increasing number of breakdowns!

After all, once something broke down, it never regained its peak condition!

Each time something broke, it became that much easier to suffer the same malfunction in the future.

This was also one of the reasons why mechs generally never lasted more than five years of intensive combat, or ten years of moderate use. They suffered so much battle damage and underwent so many field repairs and sloppy fixes that their battle efficiency eventually dropped by more than half.

At that point, it was better to sell the mech and use the gains to help purchase a new one.

As for the old mech? Refurbishers and repair shops usually subjected them to an extensive overhaul before selling them on as second-hand mechs.

However, even a relatively complete overhaul never really renewed the life expectancy of a second-hand mech. This was why many people in the industry looked down on the practice of selling second-hand mechs.

As weapons of war, mech pilots needed to rely on their mechs through thick and thin!

Ves witnessed plenty of second-hand mechs giving up the ghost too soon, particularly with the old Walter's Whalers. Some of their ramshackle mechs deactivated in the middle of the battlefield after suffering moderate damage that they should have been able to endure.

Right now, both the Vandals and the Swordmaidens worried about suffering from the same problem merely by moving around on the planet.

"This situation is unacceptable." Captain Byrd stated with evident dissatisfaction on her face. "Our current rate of attrition is far too high. By the time we reach the Starlight Megalodon, we might have already lost half our mechs and transports due to farting winds! What are our solutions?!"

Chief Dakkon stepped up again. "Ma'am, while we aren't able to shield our machines from the effects of turbulence, we can still mitigate the problem. We can keep the astral winds over our heads under observation. Whenever it becomes exceptionally violent, we can force our expedition to halt. As long as none of our mechs and transports move, the turbulent spacetime distortion won't be able to trip them up."

"How often do we have to halt if we do so?"

"At least ten hours for every standard day. We'll also have to pause for at least twenty times a day, ma'am."

"That's too much!"

Chapter 802 True Savages

The Flagrant Swordmaidens unwillingly adjusted to an irregular schedule. Due to the frequent turbulence in the astral winds, the ground forces risked accelerating the wear and tear of their all of their machines.

Ves suspected this ever since he heard about the effects of turbulence. After the meeting, he raced straight to one of the mobile workshops and inspected the damage every mech had incurred every time they set foot.

"Damnit!"

His fears came true.

Even if the machines didn't immediately break down, the minor faults that resulted from the additional strain eventually built up to a future catastrophe.

For better or worse, if the Flagrant Swordmaidens didn't wish to reach the Starlight Megalodon with hardly any intact mech or transport, then they needed to stop and hunker down each time the higher-dimensional particles started to burp.

The irregular breaks only lasted five to fifteen minutes, but they seriously started to grate on the men. Everyone's moods declined because nobody could predict when they had to stop. By the expedition stopped to let the mech pilots sleep, they all dropped dead in their temporary bunks due to the restlessness in their minds.

Worse yet, even if the ground forces halted entirely, the turbulent spacetime distortion still left their mark on the machines. Though the effect was much less severe than if they kept moving, it still accelerated the overall wear and tear of their machines.

By now, the theory that Ketis casually spouted to Ves somehow spread to all the Vandals and Swordmaidens. With such awful environmental conditions, it was no wonder the natives gave up on technology!

At the very least, it became unfeasible to operate mechs for any significant stretch of time. Ves made some calculations and predicted that even if a mech stood still all the time, it would still become inoperable after a span of a decade!

Even if it did nothing at all, the mere fact that it had come under the influence of thousands of minute variations in the spacetime distortion already simulated the effects of moderate wear-and-tear!

Frustration mounted with the people in charge of keeping the expedition moving. Now that they realized the full extent of the destructive effects of the turbulence, they all cursed as the astral winds. Why couldn't the wind blow in an even pattern like the wind blown from a simple fan?

Even Ves started to buy into the idea that the natives adjusted to a life without any advanced technology because every machine they made would break down eventually.

The only way for anyone to block the destructive effects of turbulence was if they brought a dimensional smoother like the ones used in the Glowing Planet campaign.

However, even those amazing devices wouldn't be able to withstand the power of the astral winds! Activating a dimensional smoother would turn their local area into a spacetime aberration that directly fought against the might of the astral wind directly in front of it! Like a boat in a storm, the area under the influence of the dimensional smoother would directly capsize!

Various science officers, engineers and other experts proposed various solutions, but if the descendants of the crew of the CFA couldn't figure anything out, then who could?

Everyone started to become resigned to the idea of operating under a state of frequent breakdowns and accelerated wear-and-tear. Perhaps the ancient city of Samar may have developed a solution of the problem, but from all accounts it didn't appear too likely at this moment.

"Maybe we should start taming wild gods." Ketis suggested to Ves. Though she often spouted fanciful ideas, under these dire circumstances her suggestion made a lot more sense than usual. "Hear me out. Everything mechanical is in trouble, right? I don't see the native wildlife suffering from the same problems. So why not go ahead and try and tame them? They're so big and heavy that they can probably carry a couple of containers on their backs."

Ves smiled sardonically at her. "I hate to rain on your parade, Ketis, but we'd have to tame a hundred wild gods or more to carry the same amount of supplies we are bringing with us right now."

"If we have that much wild gods, what do we need mechs for?"

"They're slow and they don't have any ranged attacks."

"Then we'll just mount our guns on their backs! Problem solved!"

These ridiculously simple solutions sounded so absurd that Ves didn't bother continuing with the conversation. The Flagrant Swordmaidens both depended on their mechs to perform their mission. Abandoning all of their machines because the environment gave them a hard time wasn't in their blood.

No matter how harsh the environment tried to beat them down, they would continue to endure!

The only problem was that a couple of experts predicted that the turbulence would only grow more violent the closer they got to the Starlight Megalodon. If they extrapolated the pattern all the way to ground zero, then the distortion grew so intense that nothing should be able to exist at the origin!

Obviously, the situation was probably more complicated than that, or else the Starlight Megalodon would have long been wiped out the instant her FTL drive malfunctioned. In any case, the Flagrant Swormaidens would figure it out eventually.

If somehow they couldn't find a solution, then maybe the natives or their rivals who also landed their forces on the planet managed to come up with something. As long as one of them figured out a solution, then the Flagrant Swordmaidens could always trade or snatch the solution for themselves.

"I don't believe that any of us will leave this planet empty-handed. Too much is at stake." He muttered.

Their progress averaged thirty kilometers a day, which wasn't too shabby despite the frequent pauses. Even though most mechs could easily traverse this distance in fifteen minutes, they'd have to leave behind the heavy transports. The mechs would never be able to last in the wild by themselves before running out of energy in a matter of hours!

Still, even if the planners expected the expedition to move at such an agonizingly slow pace didn't mean that the men and women enjoyed it. The mech pilots who had become used to short but intensive deployments couldn't adapt to this overly sedate pace of marching.

On any other planet, if the mechs wanted to traverse a long distance, they could have just boarded a transport which could easily ship them halfway across the planet in a jiffy.

That wasn't possible now!

To the mech pilots, Aeon Corona VII seemed to have ballooned in size. It took so long for them to traverse a meager distance that they felt as if they were ancient infantrymen marching on foot!

Still, slow progress or not, they eventually made it out of the wastes claimed by Hokaz. Arid, uneven ground made way for uneven grasslands interspersed with sparse forests.

It was here that they began to encounter the native wildlife. Large packs of predators stalked the vast herds of herbivores. Due to the high nutritional level of the grass and plants, the land sustained a lot of animals.

For some reason, the dumb beasts didn't behave too vigilantly in front of the walking train of mechs and transports. The mechs had to scare the witless creatures off before they blocked the path of their transports.

The Flagrant Swordmaidens even spotted their second wild god. This one consisted of a different subrace. Older by the last one by at least two centuries, this larger beast looked a lot more formidable.

However, so long as the beast did not walk into the path of the expedition, the Flagrant Swordmaidens were disinclined to butcher the beast.

It was at this time one of the scouts encountered the first tribe of wildlings!

Captain Byrd called for another meeting and presented the footage of the wildling tribe.

According to the blessed people, the wildlings were devoid of the blessings of the sacred gods. They were cursed to eke out an existence far outside the walls of the ancient cities as well as their perpetual antigrav fields.

"I thought their existence was a myth. It sounds so strange that humanity on this planet has split in two." A mech officer uttered.

The footage couldn't be more stark. The scout mech employed its long-ranged sensors to capture clear footage of the tribe of dwarves as they appeared to follow a nomadic pattern of life.

"Are those godlings?"

"They are." Dr. Tillman judged. "If I'm not mistaken, the pack animals that they are using to carry their goods are juvenile wild gods. None of them appear to be less than thirty years old."

The dwarfs each rode on the back of lizard-like creatures, each of which at least reached the size of an aircar. More powerful-looking dwarves garbed in fancier leathers and armed with weapons carved in bone rode on even larger godlings that matched the size of a shuttle.

If the blessed people at least relied on the ancient cities left behind by their forefathers, then the cursed people didn't have anything left to depend upon!

Still, despite being exposed to the full effects of the planet's gravity, neither the godlings or the wildlings displayed any discomfort.

Certainly, they moved as slow as the herds of animals that grazed these lands, but they at least showed that their species had adapted to the planet's gravity to such an extent that they possessed a stronger claim for dominance than the blessed people with their weaker bones and muscles!

Baseline humans simply couldn't step foot outside of their ancient cities without blacking out or breaking their bones!

Baseline humans wouldn't be able to give birth to any children to perpetuate their race outside the city walls, because their babies simply wouldn't be able to survive long enough to grow into adults!

In the perspective of natural selection, the dwarves or a species evolved from them were destined to take over the entire planet in time. It might take a

thousand years, a hundred thousand years, perhaps even longer, but eventually their dominance over Aeon Corona VII was inevitable.

Of course, this only applied as long as humans and aliens from the stars didn't come and intervene. Everyone expected the CFA to send out a rescue fleet in time and deliver the poor savages from salvation.

Until then, the Flagrant Swordmaidens had to come up with an approach to treat with these savages.

"They don't look like they're useful to us." Ves stated with a critical eye. "This tribe only consists of a couple of hundred people. Their weapons are made of godling bone and their housing consists of tents. What knowledge can they possibly provide us?"

Captain Byrd nodded her head. "I'm inclined to agree with you. Even if the dwarfs are capable of interfacing with a wild god, it's probably reserved to the larger tribes."

"Why are these people nomadic?" Someone asked. "Shouldn't they settle down at a single place? What forces them to keep moving?"

Nobody could answer this question, but a handful of people tried to supply an explanation. Perhaps the wild gods trampled over their villages each time they erected one. Perhaps they hunted the territory around their village to exhaustion. Perhaps they simply didn't like to stick around in one place.

No matter what, everyone was convinced that the nomadic lifestyle of the wildlings prevented them from developing as a society. They appeared to be stuck in a tribal age for many generations that they never contemplated doing anything else!

"I think.. we should at least try to talk to them." Dr. Tillman suggested. "If nothing else, interacting with these wildlings will give us a baseline on what to

expect if we meet a more formidable tribe of heavy gravity variants of the human race.

Captain Byrd took the suggestion into consideration. "Maybe you have a point. However, we'll need to be careful. According to the blessed people, these cursed people are all universally hostile to the blessed people. Even if the dwarfs don't look threatening enough, they may be hiding a trick or two up their sleeves. I'll discuss the option with the Swordmaidens."

Chapter 803 Rank Disparity

The meeting with the wildlings went as violent as expected. The Swordmaidens and Vandals opted to greet the tribal dwarf nomads without mechs and on foot. They wore medium and heavy combat armor to balance speed and protection.

The armor also helped to distinguish them from the tall and lean forms of the blessed people without appearing too threatening. Nobody knew how the dwarves would react against mechs, so the ground forces kept them out of sight.

Of course, they might as well be ghosts or monsters from the reaction of the savages. The Dwarves all yelled at the first contact delegation before holding up their spears and clubs in a battle stance.

While their men urged their golding mounts to slowly charge forward, their women and children drove their smaller mounts away from the battle.

No matter what the Vandals and Swordmaidens tried to say, the dwarves completely ignored their entreaties.

They didn't even yell in standard language! It was obvious that their language had diverged into a completely new form!

Though the Vandals turned on their translator AIs, they wouldn't be able to decipher the new language completely without hours of recordings.

With no way to break the language barrier, the first contact delegation helplessly switched to plan B. They deployed gas grenades laced with sedatives and other non-lethal toxins.

"The sedatives aren't having any effect!" Dr. Tillman spoke over the command channel. "These high gravity variant humans are much more advanced than we suspected! Careful!"

Captain Byrd cursed. "Commence plan C. If we can't gas them to sleep, we'll just have to knock them out the old-fashioned way! Kill their godling mounts but keep the dwarves alive unless your life is at risk!"

Throughout the galaxy, dwarves had taken on a negative connotation, with some humans even referring to them as subhumans rather than an equal to baseline humans.

This was because many dwarves emerged as cheap mining labor on mineral-rich Super Earths. These huge planets with a considerable amount of mass often possessed high concentrations of heavy ores and exotics.

It usually wasn't worthwhile and economic to devote these planets to anything else that required advanced skills and well-paid professionals. Therefore, the dwarves that toiled on these Super Earths often received a bad reputation for being dirty miners who weren't suitable for anything else.

The Flagrant Swordmaidens became affected by this bias as well, so when they saw the wildlings behaving like savages, they possessed no scruples to treat them roughly. Unlike the blessed people who by all accounts appeared to be the legitimate successors of the officers and crew of the Starlight Megalodon, the dwarves were kind of like the illegitimate bastard children.

The CFA would probably discard the primitive and repulsive dwarves once they saw them. The degenerated variants possessed no redeeming value.

"Kill the beasts and knock them out!"

The Vandals this time sent out a considerable amount of security officers. All of them trained their marksmanship to a considerable level, so when they whipped out their laser rifles and struck at the juvenile godlings, they never wavered in their aim.

A flurry of laser beams struck the heads and other vulnerable parts of the lizard-like beasts the dwarves used as their mounts and pack animals. Due to their heavy gravity adaptation, they moved as fast as a human walking forward in a sedate pace under a normal pace.

If a trained security officer missed their mark under these circumstances, they should be ashamed of themselves!

Their laser rifles heated up relatively quickly, but the straight beams made aiming them very simple. The 'charging' godlings might as well be stationary targets due to how slow they actually trod forward!

For all the damage these potentially future wild gods received, the creatures proved to be surprisingly resilient against infantry-grade laser weapons. Their thick mass and resilient scales made it a bit more challenging to get past their protective layer.

No matter. The Vandals enjoyed all the time in the world.

"Maintain distance!"

Each time the godling mounts plodded forward, the Vandals took a couple of steps backwards. Under the influence of their gravitic backpacks, they moved as easily as if they walked on a normal planet. They could even sprint and run if they had to with the help of their servos incorporated their combat armor!

Some of the savage dwarf warriors let out a frustrated cry as their trusty steeds succumbed to the lethal lasers. With smoking holes burned through their skulls, the creatures stood no chance at all!

As the dwarf warriors brandished their bone weapons and attempted to close the distance on their thick, stubby legs, it became obvious why they spent so much effort on taming a godling herd.

"They're so slow!"

As melee warriors, the Swordmaidens went into action at this time. Their antigrav-enhanced combat armor sprung into action, closing the distance with rapid speed. Though they unsheathed their greatswords, they refrained from using their edges to slice the dwarves.

Instead, the Swordmaidens smacked the savage dwarves with the flat end of the blade!

The clumsy dwarves, used to pounding at each other by raiding their weapons and chopping them down with considerable force with the help of gravity, simply couldn't cope with the nimble movements of the Swordmaidens.

The two forces played by different rules, and the Swordmaidens that possessed an absolute advantage in speed never got hit!

In fact, one of the more adventurous Swordmaidens even decided to stand still and let a dwarf smack her armor with a club. Though the force exerted by the dwarf was strong enough to cause it to dent, that was the entire extent of the damage.

Unless the dwarves managed to trip a Swordmaiden up and gang up on her, they had no chance at all at felling the women.

The dwarves possessed thick muscles and a very resilient head for their size. Their intelligence may have taken a slide backwards, but their physical strength and endurance more than made up for it. The Swordmaidens took a lot longer than they thought to knock the dwarf warriors senseless.

"Alright, that's enough." Captain Byrd spoke over the comm. "Restrain five of them and take them away. Oh, and secure a godling beast mount as well."

A while later, Ves, Captain Byrd, Chief Dakkon and a couple of other experts entered the biolab. The exobiologists descended upon the dwarves with considerable interest. They scanned and studied the unconscious dwarves, even cutting in a couple of them to study them down to the core.

"What are the results of your investigation, doc?"

Dr. Tillman achieved greater prominence ever since they made landfall. Since so many strange forms of life dominated this planet, it became essential to understand their traits.

The wildling tribe they encountered might not amount to anything, but the blessed people obviously dreaded them. Before the Flagrant Swordmaidens encountered the larger tribes that managed to tame an adult wild god, it became important for them to figure out the origin of the dwarves.

"Our studies have been fruitful." The doctor began. "The results are surprising. First, they are definitely descended from the crew of the CFA. However, before I go in on their attributes, I would first like to state that we've discovered an important difference when we compared the genes of the blessed people with the genes of the cursed people."

"Oh?" Captain Byrd raised one of her eyebrows. "Do tell."

"It's common knowledge that the Common Fleet Alliance provides standardized gene treatments to their own people. These gene treatments generally don't blend in alien genes, but are mostly meant to optimize the genes of baseline humans so that they are able to achieve their peak potential. Even then, there are different degrees of gene treatments, with the more advanced ones requiring more expensive reagents over multiple treatments."

Chief Dakkon nodded. "A lowly ship rating only qualifies for a basic gene treatment, while the officers enjoy increasingly generous ones. By the time a CFA officer is promoted to captain, they've practically become superhuman in almost every aspect!"

The MTA maintained their own regime of gene treatments. Though the Big Two discouraged unscrupulous genetic modification, they weren't above using it to their own advantage.

The biggest difference with other organizations was that they stressed human purity! Every gene treatment had to transform its recipient into a more perfect human!

After the horrors that happened at the Age of Conquest, the Big Two were determined not to repeat the mistakes of the past. The CFA in particular also wanted to disassociate themselves from the insane admirals who unscrupulously abused their power and engaged in genocide on a whim.

"Each genetic treatment leaves behind a characteristic marking that is inheritable by their offspring." Dr. Tillman continued. "While we don't have the latest versions of these markers in our local database, we do have a fairly complete library of markers that used to be common three-hundred years ago. When we matched the genes of the blessed and cursed people with the markers, we've identified a clear class difference."

Ves smelled where this was going. "Let me guess. The blessed people are the descendants of the officers and experts of the Starlight Megalodon, while the cursed people are the descendants of the riff-raff."

"That is so." Dr. Tillman glowered a bit at Ves for ruining her big reveal. Served her right for building up too much to this revelation. "The genes of the wildlings have experienced much more radical changes compared to the

genes of the blessed people. The exobiologists and geneticists have been much less restrained when it comes to the dwarves."

Nobody quite knew what to make of this revelation. Had the relations between the ranks broken down for some reason? Why turn the offspring of the enlisted personnel into squat, dumb and ugly dwarves? Why maintain the blessed people in their weak, mostly baseline human form?

The exobiologists in the employ of the Vandals touched upon the history of what had happened after the Starlight Megalodon crash-landed on Seven. Perhaps a desperate struggle for survival and continuity broke out at some point between the leaders and their subordinates.

It was difficult to imagine what had happened thousands of years ago under the influence of the spacetime distortion of the astral winds. The accelerated time on the surface of the planet only allowed the Flagrant Swordmaidens to touch upon the consequences of the events that happened in the past.

"What about the dwarves themselves?" Captain Byrd asked. "You mentioned during first contact that the dwarves aren't regular examples of a high gravity variant."

Dr. Tillman glanced at the dwarves beyond the observation window. A handful of exobiologists buzzed over an unconscious dwarf. "Much like there is diversity among mechs, there is diversity among gene templates ma'am. Even though the dwarves throughout the galaxy are mostly derived from a single dominant high gravity variant, there are in fact more comprehensive ones that touch upon certain taboos. Unfortunately, the wildlings are the product of an illegal template, the so-called dark dwarf template."

Nobody recognized the significance of that term. "Is that why their skin is uniformly darker?"

The dwarves all possessed skin and hair as black as gorillas.

"It's more than that. The dark dwarf template takes the idea of dwarfs as low-class labor to its logical extreme. The genes of this variant of humans is even further strengthened at the cost of their longevity. While their maturity is slightly stretched, they will never grow old and feeble because their genes will shut their bodies down as soon as the first onset of old age arrives. This prevents their employers from having to provide for their retirement."

The Vandals all began to look at the exobiologist in horror.

"That's barbaric! Dwarves are always treated badly, but at least they still share in the dignity of the human race. This change is literally geared towards treating them as slaves!"

Dr. Tillman sighed again. "It's worse than that. The dark dwarf template deliberately affects their brain chemistry and development. Their intelligence is permanently underdeveloped and stuck in a juvenile and impressionable stage. They simply aren't able to learn any advanced knowledge, so it's impossible for them to become managers, scientists, lawyers and the like. The best they can achieve with their underdeveloped brains is to become foremen of the mining operations their slave species are designed to work for the entirety of their lives!"

Ves picked out an important detail in her speech. "You say ordinarily. I take it the wildlings we kidnapped aren't the same?"

"That's very astute of you, Mr. Larkinson. In truth, the exobiologists have modified the dark dwarf template by adding alien genes. To be more precise, they've added the genes of god species into their DNA!"

God species genes! Everyone looked stunned at that revelation. Even Ves hadn't anticipated such a crazy thing. How could these savage wildlings share anything in common with the ferocious wild gods?

Chapter 804 Experimental Group

"Back when you studied the DNA of the wild gods, you stated that their genes have received extensive modifications as well."

"That's correct. The genes implanted in the DNA of these wildlings largely consists of those modified elements. You can say that the wildlings and the wild gods have received the same set of gene treatments."

Dr. Tillman rambled on a bit about the genes, but hardly anyone understood her point. When she noticed how absent-minded her audience got, she quickly summarized her conclusion.

"In short, we don't know what the exobiologists actually intended with these genes. They're far from simple and it's deliberately more complex than necessary. It will take at least a couple of decades for me to decipher the role of these alien genes."

"What can you tell us about the wildlings then?"

"Well, they are predisposed to behave in certain ways. While their brain structure has been altered, mostly to cope with the heavy gravity, what we did find out is that their intelligence hasn't actually been curtailed. Instead, certain instincts are strengthened while other behavior is suppressed. I wouldn't be surprised if these wildlings are completely incapable of developing their civilization like normal humans. Forget about developing to the point where they can launch satellites into orbit. They aren't even capable of constructing anything more complicated than a house."

"Do the blessed people suffer from the same kind of brain altering?"

"Surprisingly, no." The exobiologist shook her head. "While their genes have undergone some tailoring as well, they still remain better versions of baseline humans. The few modifications that are different from the officer-grade gene treatments all pertain to adaptation to this planet. For example, their

strengthened hearts and bloodstream ensures that they won't black out as fast when subjected to heavy gravity."

"This kind of looks like a mad scientist's experiment to me." Ves stated as he narrowed his eyes a bit. For some reason, he started to think of the weird organisms on the planet as a massive testing ground. "If the goal of some or all of the exobiologists and geneticists is to develop a strain of humanity that can best survive the harsh conditions of this planet, then they might have pursued an extreme solution with the wildlings, but left the blessed people in the cities as a control group."

In the perspective of exobiologists, the blessed people with their frail baseline human constitutions simply wouldn't be able to last on the planet. Though they somehow managed to perpetuate their existence by developing a means to generate antigrav fields without technology, these stagnant people have never expanded beyond the remnant cities laid down by their forefathers.

As far as the Vandals were concerned, the wildlings possessed the capability to survive in the wild, and thus might have spread their people around the entire globe!

Over time, their numbers would unceasingly rise, and despite their curtailed intelligence would probably become more cunning and inventive over time, though that might take millions of years to affect.

"There is one other detail about the wildlings that you should know." Dr. Tillman added. "The exobiologists have increased the chance of genetic variation in the wildlings. Their DNA is being copied at higher error rates than in baseline humans. This leads to a lot of miscarriages and infant mortality. Those who survive may exhibit lingering weaknesses but also a rare superior benefit. In fact, these wildlings we've encountered are already smarter than their initial iteration. They're slowly developing towards higher intelligence."

"So in other words, the wildlings experience a lot more mutation than baseline humans, and the ones who are smarter than the rest often hold an advantage?"

"That's correct."

"Sounds a lot like how humans used to evolve on Old Earth."

The various experts didn't understand what the CFA exobiologists and geneticists were thinking. Why turn their enlisted into intellectually-challenged dark dwarves, but subsequently give them a way out in the long term? Perhaps it might take a few million years, but eventually this race might be able to surpass the blessed people in intelligence!

The wildlings already possessed an advantage in adaptation. If they grew smart enough in some areas, the blessed people resting on their laurels within the protective embrace of their city walls would become extinct!

Chief Dakkon came to another conclusion. "I've got a different perspective from Ves. Rather than regard the dwarves and the city folk as an experimental group and a control group, what I see instead are the result of internal contradictions. What if the survivors split up for some reason? What if they got into an argument, and the enlisted personnel lost? I doubt they want to turn themselves into these dark dwarves."

"What about the propensity for mutation?"

"Maybe there is a dissident in the team of geneticists and exobiologists. One of them didn't agree to the plan to turn all the enlisted personnel into a slave species, so he or she put in a sneaky long-term bomb into the genetic code. Doctor, how obvious is this change?"

"It's not very obvious at the start." Dr. Tillman replied. "There isn't a single geneticist or exobiologist who can read an entire genetic code. So even if one of their members attempts to pervert a section of genes, the malfeasance

won't necessarily be noticed. We've only been able to detect the change in genetic variation because hundreds of generation have already produced a diverse variety of minor mutations."

This didn't necessarily confirmed Chief Dakkon's theory, but it did make it a bit more likely to be true. Whatever the case, the entire gene structure of the wildlings was so complex and incorporated so many modifications that perhaps no one really knew what came out of it. Even though they looked like dark dwarves, they possessed a considerable amount of depth.

The Vandals only came across the tip of the iceberg. What truly happened with these wildlings required much more extensive studies. The exobiologists already had their hands full with studying the wild gods. Adding wildlings to their plate only burdened them further.

"For now, the wildlings don't appear to be threatening to us." Captain Byrd stated at the end. "Dr. Tillman, continue to prioritize the study into the god species. The wild gods and the sacred gods are the only entities we've encountered so far that can threaten our mechs."

"Understood, ma'am."

Compared to studying variant humans, the study of the exobeasts interested the exobiologists a lot more. Nobody expressed much interest in figuring out the truth behind the degenerated dwarves!

The ground expedition proceeded onwards to the ancient city of Samar. The Flagrant Swordmaidens passed the wildling tribe they decimated and continued to traverse the increasingly more fertile plains.

Even greater herds of animals sometimes blocked their way. And where herds of animals existed, so did their predators. The Flagrant Swordmaidens encountered several scattered tribes of wildlings and even a wild god or two.

The wildling tribes all went mad and attempted to run when they sighted the flood of mechs and legged transports. The slow stampede amused some of the Vandal and Swordmaiden mech pilots, so sometimes they deliberately strolled over to elicit panic in the dwarves.

Ves shook his head at this banal behavior. The stress and the unfamiliar environment led to a lot of unruliness. The professionalism ingrained within the bones of the servicemen had already started to erode.

Even the disciplined Swordmaidens started to become more impulse.

The savages didn't understand what the mechs represented. The metallic giants moved faster and much more fluid than any of the native wildlife.

It didn't help that the stature of the mechs resembled the stature of the blessed people! When confronted by the mechs, due to the acquired hostility against the blessed people, some wildlings berserk and charged at the tall machines!

Some mech pilots let the silly dwarves approach their feet, giving every mech pilot witnessing the futile charge a good laugh.

The dumb dwarves hit the exterior of the mechs with their thick bone clubs or sharpened bone axes, only to leave no mark at all. As for their godling mounts, their claws and teeth couldn't even scratch the coating of the mech!

Almost every comm channel became filled with laughter and insults.

"These stupid dwarves are so dumb! And these are supposed to be the smarter ones? They've got a few million years left to go!"

As the ferocious dwarf warriors continued to whack at the foot of the Swordmaiden Devil Razor to no avail, the chieftain of the tribe finally trod forward on his imposing-looking godling beast.

Unlike every other godling beast they've encountered so far, this one reached the size of a third of a mech. Its age had reached an unprecedented fifty years old. If it survived for fifty more years, it was eligible to mature into a full-sized wild god!

Unfortunately, as the godlings grew in size, their aggressiveness and appetite increased in turn. As they grew from small and meek younglings into larger and deadlier adolescents, their hormones drove them to actively hunt their prey.

They had to because they needed to take in a lot more calories to survive! The larger their weight, the more energy they expended. Mechs weren't exempt from this rule either.

In any case, no matter how large the godling had grown, it still lacked the ability to challenge a mech. The Devil Razor gently smacked the godling away with a punch. The creature moaned and almost threw off its rider.

The dwarf chieftain roared in anger at the swordsman mech. What gave these metal giants the right to bully his tribe?!

Of course, the mech pilots continued to laugh and jeer at the impotent dwarves.

"Look at that big fellow roar! I think by the time the translator AIs is finished with deciphering their language, I bet half of the words consists of insults!"

"These dwarves all stink! Look at that squatting dwarf back there! It's treating the open plain as its toilet! Disgusting!"

As the mech pilots continued their idle entertainment, the wildling chieftain stopped venting his anger and started to stretch his arm out to the Devil Razor on top of his moaning mount.

Nothing happened for a dozen seconds, and everyone ignored the chieftain's pointless gesture.

That was until the Swordmaiden mech pilot suddenly screamed in the comm channel!

"AAAHH!! It hurts! My mind frigging hurts!"

The Devil Razor suddenly took a few frantic steps as if it had lost control! The dwarves that attacked the feet of the mech suddenly flung away as the mech flung its feet around.

As the affected Swordmaiden continued to scream over the comm, the other mech pilots panicked.

"What is going on?!"

"Why is she screaming?"

"Are we under attack?!"

"It's that chieftain! Kill it first!"

Another Devil Razor stepped forward and sliced its broad blade downwards, instantly bisecting the concentrating dwarf chieftain as well as chopping through the neck of his godling mount!

The instant kill immediately relieved the crisis! The event had alarmed the Flagrant Swordmaidens, and some of the other mechs started to fire their weapons at the surviving dwarves in panic.

"Retreat! Pull back, goddammit! You guys and girls are worse than a mob! And you there! Go and pick up the chieftain's corpse! We'll let the docs figure out his tricks!"

One of the Vandal mechs carefully cupped the bisected remains of the chieftain and fled along with the rest.

The entire sight of mechs fleeing from a tribe of primitive dwarves was perplexing! Many mech pilots felt ashamed for pulling back and eagerly wished to wipe out the indigenous savages!

The event caught the attention of Ves as well. He already had a good idea of what had happened. He immediately wanted to dig through the telemetry of the Devil Razor, only to recall that it fell under the jurisdiction of the Swordmaidens.

Ves made a comm request to Mayra. When her face popped up in the projection, he immediately voiced his guess. "Has the dwarf chieftain affected the man-machine connection somehow?"

"I'm still studying the logs." The Journeyman replied with a grave expression. "You should come over and take a look. You know more about neural interfaces than I. Maybe you can tell what has happened."

"I'll be over right away!"

Chapter 805 Third Wheel

After the inexplicable incident where a primitive dwarf managed to incapacitate one of their mech pilots through the air, the Flagrant Swordmaidens avoided the wildling tribes like a plague.

For the time being, nobody knew whether any other wildling possessed the power to induce pain on the mech pilots. The expedition immediately began to make detours around the wildling tribes, even if they consisted of a few hundred bedraggled dwarves.

None of the mech pilots wanted to bear the humiliation of getting subdued by a primitive dwarf all by itself!

It was one thing to be defeated by mechs or other formidable weapons of war. In fact, Lieutenant Dise of the Swordmaidens enjoyed an even greater level of

renown among her sisters despite losing her duel against the sacred god Hokaz.

Mech pilots earned more prestige when they faced increasingly formidable opponents. Whether they won or lost, lived or died, the fact that they put their lives on the line on the battlefield or dueling grounds already proved their valor!

Against an exobeast as powerful and majestic as a five-hundred year old sacred god with the power to call down a wide-area lightning storm, there was no shame in losing against this literal force of nature!

However, it was one thing to lose against the Tyrant of the Wastes. It was another thing entirely to lose against a smelly dwarf who would get instantly squashed the moment a mech stomped its feet over its head!

Ves huffed at the rowdy mech pilots. "Serves them right for bullying the natives. There's so much crap in their genes that they shouldn't have underestimated these wildlings."

After receiving an invitation, he went over to the heavy transport that served as one of the workshops for the Swordmaidens. Right now, the workshop took in the Devil Razor that the dwarf chieftain inexplicably affected with his bare hands.

Nobody could explain what had happened!

Perhaps some of the more astute Vandals and Swordmaidens already guessed the cause. It was no secret that the blessed people and the cursed people possessed the ability to connect their minds to the god species.

The big exobeasts even incorporated biological antennas in their brain structure that attuned them to remote connections.

What the Flagrant Swordmaidens never expected was that the wildlings possessed the ability to interfere with another man-machine connection at a distance! This increased their threat level from harmless savages into dangerous savages.

Though only one wildling so far showed off the ability to affect a mech, perhaps this ability was shared among the rest of their race. If that was so, then the wildlings became a fearsome force that absolutely couldn't be allowed to come close enough to perform their mind voodoo on the mechs!

"Mayra." Ves greeted the Journeyman as he stepped into the workshop. "Tell me what you know."

Mayra sat behind a terminal that projected a raft of telemetry readings. Ketis hadn't accompanied either mech designers at this time. As far as Ves knew, the young woman had gotten bored at the monotony of travel and started to hang out with the other Swordmaidens.

"Come sit with me, Ves." Mayra patted the seat next to hers. "According to the telemetry of the mech at the time of the incident, the mech experienced conflicting commands. Look at the readings from the neural interface."

When Ves studied the raw data, he couldn't make heads or tails of it beyond confirming that something extremely abnormal happened. One of the readings normally looked like a flat line that angled upwards and downwards from time to time.

Shortly after the chieftain stretched out his hand, the normally placid line started to go crazy. It jerked up and down at sharp angles as it completely lost stability!

Such examples happened everywhere. The neural interface somehow became flooded with anomalous data, causing it to send out invalid

instructions to the Devil Razor. The mech lost control of its limbs because it was essentially fighting against itself!

Though Ves couldn't read the erratic patterns, they all sprung up from a single cause. "To my judgement, the anomalous input fits with the notion that the dwarf chieftain somehow managed to connect to the man-machine interface. His vulgar mind must have barged in and flooded both the mech and mech pilot with his chaotic thoughts. That caused the mech to spin out of control while causing the mech pilot considerable pain from the feedback."

"The Devil Razors don't make use of remote neural interfaces." Mayra frowned. "The genetic aptitude of our Swordmaidens aren't great. They need all the help that they can get, so the only way our Swordmaidens can interface with my mechs is if they physically connect their helmets with the neural interface. This physical connection shouldn't be affected by remote. It's simply not possible to do so!"

This was basically like stuffing a cookie into someone else's mouth in another room.

How could someone possibly place the cookie in the mouth of someone else when a significant distance as well as a solid wall stood in the way?

Teleportation? Phase change? Please!

Still, no matter how absurd it sounded, according to the data something like this had actually happened! They forcefully intruded their minds into a closed system and attempted to take control!

This was extremely scary, because it also signified that these wildlings might be able to interface with an empty from remote with nothing more than their minds!

If that was possible, then these dwarfs possessed the capacity to inflict a huge amount of damage every time the ground forces stopped at the end of a standard day.

The mech pilots couldn't couldn't operate their mechs continuously. As humans, they needed to eat, sleep and relax like other humans. For that reason, the Flagrant Swordmaidens interrupted their journey for at least six continuous hours every standard day.

This was on top of the intermittent pauses called out whenever the astral winds experienced turbulence.

At some times, the ground forces even spent more time at standstill than on the move! The astral winds were fickle and capricious in their patterns.

Ves spent several hours in trying to make sense of the data. He consulted with some of the Vandal doctors, but he hadn't managed to find out much.

When it came time to report to Commander Lydia and Captain Byrd, he reported what little he knew about what happened.

"I'm not sure how, but the dwarf chieftain managed to intrude on the man-machine connection facilitated by a closed neural interface loop that can only be accessed through physical touch. I can't explain how the dwarf managed to do so, but I can tell what effect this has accomplished. Simply put, it turned a two-way exchange of data into a threeway exchange. However, the neural interface isn't designed to accommodate a third wheel!"

Right now, the Swordmaiden mech pilot was still trying to recover in the infirmary. Her brain swelled up from the sudden impact of junk data flooding her mind.

She hadn't been able to process the input at all! Ves and some people surmised that the junk data actually consisted of the thoughts of the dwarf chieftain, but in an incompatible form.

It was like the mech pilots communicated with their mechs and vica versa in language A. Suddenly a dwarf chieftain ran up to the pair and crashed into their conversation by speaking language B.

"Do you believe this is the dwarf chieftain's method of interfacing with a wild god at work?" Commander Lydia asked.

"A lot of evidence so far suggests that's the case, commander." Ves replied. In fact, he pretty much bought into this theory, but he still needed to be careful with his assumptions. "The anomalous input our neural interface has captured presumably comes from the dwarf chieftain. The data we've received is completely incompatible with the neural interfaces of our mechs. The neural interface wouldn't be able to translate this data into concrete instructions for the mech. They won't be able to hijack our mechs any time soon."

This gave Commander Lydia and Captain Byrd some much-needed relief. While the dwarves still possessed the ability to scramble the mind-machine connection, at least they wouldn't be able to turn the mechs against each other.

"Can we guard against this attack?" Captain Byrd asked. She was much more interested in a solution. "It's possible that we will meet more formidable tribes along our route. According to the blessed people, the wildling tribes become more formidable in lush areas, and they become increasingly more formidable the closer we get to the Starlight Megalodon. We can't afford to put our melee mechs out of action each time we clash against these wildling tribes!"

Commander Lydia looked at Ves with imploring eyes. She echoed Captain Byrd's concerns. The Swordmaidens truly favored melee mechs over ranged mechs, so they became the most affected by this phenomenon.

Ves had to be careful about his answer. "There's no other way to shield against a third influence than to modify the neural interfaces of our mechs. While I have some ideas on how to block this third influence from intruding in an existing man-machine connection, each change involves the neural interface in some way. With my shallow expertise, any change is exceedingly dangerous. Any mistake I make might result in an improper connection which might quickly lead to permanent brain damage!"

This was no joke! Even his previous attempt at tampering the neural interfaces of Venerable Xie's mechs wasn't as dangerous as this. No matter how Ves managed to block out a third influence, he couldn't go around modifying the neural interface system itself!

Both leaders frowned. Captain Byrd looked at Commander Lydia before turning to Mayra, who was sitting quietly besides Ves. "Miss Mayra, do you concur with Ves?"

"I'm not an expert at all in neural interfaces." Mayra calmly replied. "Ves isn't either. The difference between us is that he received an initiation in this field through unconventional means. He is more knowledgeable than I in this area, but that hardly amounts to anything. The odds of anything going catastrophically wrong is substantial."

Though Mayra basically attacked his competence, Ves didn't fight back against her statements.

She was telling the commanding officers the truth.

Ves truly considered himself a novice in this field. It might be possible for him to mess with the programming of the neural interface by inserting some premade code.

Yet a change as substantial as trying to block the dwarfs from intruding into the connection most likely involved more extensive changes in code. He couldn't rule out a hardware change either.

All of these measures demanded an extensive set of modifications. Each change introduced the possibility of making a mistake.

Byrd and Lydia argued a bit among themselves. Neither could make up their mind on whether to trust Ves to come up with a solution and apply it to their mechs. It was way too risky to subject the neural interfaces of their mechs to the inexperienced hands of Ves, but the alternative was to keep this vulnerability out in the open for any wildling chieftain to exploit!

Eventually, they decided to tip-toe their way into the water instead of diving in straight-away.

"Go research the matter." Captain Byrd finally ordered. "When you've developed a solution, we'll test it out with one or two mechs. As long as there are no adverse effects, we'll slowly expand the changes among our melee mechs."

In any case, their ranged mechs should never come close enough to the dwarfs for them to work their mind magic on them. Only the melee mechs needed to get close in order to hack them with their swords and spears.

"Understood. I'll try and come up with a solution. However, it will take some time before I manage to do so."

"Take your time, Mr. Larkinson, but be sure it is safe. Our mech pilots many need to put their lives on the line."

Ves gulped. "I'll never let them down, ma'am."

Chapter 806 Research Proposal

The new assignment Ves received from the commanding officers burdened him immensely. Not only did he have to supervise the periodic breakdowns

because the fickle astral winds decided to have a hissy fit, but he also had to touch upon a taboo.

Ketis didn't quite understand his dilemma. "What's the big deal? I know that messing with neural interfaces is dangerous and all, but it's for a good cause, right? Besides, we're so far away from the big bad MTA that they won't mind a little thing like this. Why do you still care for their rules?"

"This isn't as simple as it sounds." Ves grimaced at her as he sat behind a terminal in the mobile workshop. The projector currently displayed the design schematic of a standard neural interface. "Anything we do here will go on record. Once the Flagrant Vandals eventually return to civilized space, they'll file the records over to the Mech Corps, which means the Bright Republic knows. And if the Bright Republic knows, the Mech Trade Association will surely find out soon after."

Everyone believed the Big Two inserted their spies in every government and every major mercenary corps. The MTA in particular liked to take responsibility for maintaining internal order within human space. While the CFA generally took care of matters outside the borders, the MTA kept tabs on every organization that fielded mechs.

According to the rumors, only the first-rate superstates possessed enough might contend against these spies. Some even fantasized about a shadow war taking place between the Big Two and the first-rate superstates!

Of course, out here on the galactic rim, none of the states that settled in this expanse possessed the power to resist such sophisticated infiltration. Not only the Big Two, but other powerful trans-galactic organizations sometimes extended their tentacles towards the rim.

Sadly, Ketis never witnessed the power of these mighty organizations in person. To her, the MTA and CFA had always been silent and distant.

"I still don't see the big deal. They never had to deal with these mind-controlling dwarves that can hijack the man-machine connection. Right now, if you don't do something about it, every native will be able to disable our mechs once they find out what they can do!"

This was the scariest part about the natives. The genetic modifications applied to the cursed people had changed their brains beyond recognition, yet the blessed people weren't exempt from some of these changes either.

Both the blessed and the cursed people possessed the ability to interface their minds with the god species!

How else did the blessed people managed to come to an accord with the sacred gods? During the duels against Hokaz and Naevudis, a fair number of sensors captured the man-beast connection between the sacred gods and their chosen.

Those sensor readings didn't lie! The blessed people possessed the same modifications to their brain structure that allowed them to interface with a beast without a physical connection, just like their more primitive dwarf cousins!

Once they managed to get their hands on the body of a blessed people's corpse, the exobiologists would be able to confirm what the analysis of their DNA had already hinted towards.

According to Dr. Tillman, the blessed people's DNA may be purer than that of the cursed people, but they weren't exactly a control group. They were actually a second experimental group, one that tested their adaptability to the planet with less extreme modifications.

This was like putting two different species of beetles in a jar and forcing them to fight! Except this time, the beetles consisted of variations of the human race and the jar was instead a giant Super Earth!

This was an experiment spanning over several millennia on a planetary scale!

All of this begged the question: who among the survivors of the crashed battleship ultimately became in charge? The officers? The enlisted personnel? The exobiologists? Spies from the Five Scrolls Compact?

Nobody knew! Not even Ves! The things he learned about this cursed planet increasingly alienated him and the rest of the Flagrant Swordmaidens.

Nobody liked to be treated as an experiment!

In any case, it wasn't actually too hard for Ves to figure out a solution to the problem. The neural interface already incorporated multiple layers of checks and filters that prevented input from intruders.

In fact, they should have blocked the intrusion from the dwarf chieftain!

His first task was to find out why these filters slacked off.

Yet he immediately hit upon a wall when he tried to investigate the matter.

The dwarf chieftain's mind somehow managed to bypass the filters and insert themselves directly into the middle of the data streams.

This was like jumping over a city wall instead of trying to break through its defenses. The latter would have forced the neural interface into rousing its defenses, but the former prevented it from raising an alarm.

The more Ves investigated the methods of the dwarf chieftain's intrusion, the more he became scared of what he saw.

"What's wrong, Ves?" Ketis asked.

While she didn't possess a clue about neural interfaces, she was still useful in studying the effects of the loss of control of the mech.

"Whoever engineered these wildlings is a genius." He whispered with a tone that carried both dread and awe. "Crazy, but genius. If every wildling potentate

is capable of interfacing with a mech or beast in this manner, then that makes them natural-born mech pilots! Don't you see?"

"What? But they're stupid savages!"

"That's not the point. Whoever managed to engineer these dwarves can just as well apply the same modifications to other strains of humanity. In fact, I think the blessed people may be the second iteration of an experiment to design the perfect mech pilot! If I'm reading this right, then this dwarf chieftain's mental prowess is a match to a mech pilot with an A-grade genetic aptitude!"

"That's impossible!" Ketis burst out. "Those smelly stinking dwarves are supposed to be a slave species, right?! How can they be better mech pilots than us?!"

Although Ves only possessed a single example, when he extrapolated it to the rest of the population of dwarves, the numbers threatened to boggle his mind. How many supremely-talented potentates had been born among the dwarves?

What the Flagrant Swordmaidens had bumped into earlier only consisted of a small tribe of a couple of hundred dwarves!

What of more powerful tribes? What of the tribes that managed to domesticate a wild god?

Perhaps thousands of dwarf potentates with an A-grade genetic aptitude roamed the surface of Aeon Corona VII right now!

"This is only the dwarves. I bet the blessed people have the same talented potentates as well! This entire planet is an elite mech breeding ground!"

Ketis still had trouble following his train of thought. "That doesn't make any sense. These natives are descended from people who used to serve the CFA. What does a bunch of hardcore spaceborn ship lover have to do with mechs?"

"Anything mechanical doesn't work on this planet barring special circumstances. Didn't you propose that theory in the first place?" Ves pointed out. "It may be that they engineered their offspring and the wild gods as replacements for mech pilots and mechs. For what reason, I don't know, but the ones responsible are definitely pursuing an overarching vision!"

As a mech designer, Ves was keenly sensitive towards actions that pursuing a specific vision. Many professions used the methodology that Ves adopted in his design process, because it applied to any instance of creation!

To create something, you either let your whims take control, or you set a firm goal post in the distance and tried to reach it! Right now, Ves sensed that the exobiologists and geneticists who messed with the genes of every living organism on this planet pursued a specific goal.

They hadn't been messing about at random!

"I still think we should try and tame our own wild gods." Ketis humphed. "Since it's such a big deal, why not try it ourselves?"

In fact, a lot of mech pilots put out such a suggestion. Despite the risks involved with interfacing with a living alien creature, many mech pilots became enamored at the thought of riding a majestic beast.

Unfortunately, neither Commander Lydia nor Captain Byrd entertained these fanciful notions. Their strength lay firmly in mechs. They had confidence that they could finish the mission and extract from this planet before their mechs and transports all broke down. Chief Dakkon even simulated their rate of breakdowns and pronounced that it would take about two standard years for them to lose the bulk of their mechs.

In any case, Ves wrote a quick report of what he found out and passed them on to Mayra, Dr. Tillman and Captain Byrd. Right now, his job wasn't to dig out the truth behind the planet, but to harden the defenses of their mechs against mental intrusion from the indigeneous people.

Ves contemplated his direction. He could choose to modify the filters by adjusting their software, but that wouldn't be very useful. The dwarf chieftain already showed off the ability to jump over the city walls. No matter how fancy or strong he made those walls, as long as the natives jumped high enough, they could continue to disregard these filters.

"I'll have to come up with a hardware solution, then."

However, Ves encountered another set of difficulties here. He didn't know the mechanics behind the dwarf chieftain's ability to remotely interface with a mech or wild god.

After an hour of ineffectual puzzling with the design of a random neural interface, Ves recognized that he was completely out of his depth! He lacked the theoretical foundation to modify the hardware of a neural interface to better shield itself against a remote connection.

Ves came to the conclusion that he couldn't solve this problem through design work!

However, there was another way to solve this problem that didn't necessarily require a deep foundation in the complicated fields of neural interfaces and neurology.

"I can experiment through trial and error!"

Many researchers that explored the cutting edge of science didn't necessarily know what they were doing exactly. However, that didn't deter them from their research. Through trial and error, they formulated rules and confirmed or disproved their hypotheses.

In general, mech designers like Ves preferred to apply existing knowledge to design their mechs, but they weren't above performing their own research, especially when it concerned their core design philosophies.

Because they were attempting to tread a path into the unknown mists, they often didn't know which path led to a dead end.

This was why Journeyman and Senior Mech Designers tended to perform many experiments. Through trial and error, they learned which paths would be safe to tread and which paths led to a dead end or a bottomless pit.

Ves concluded he needed to take the same approach to this problem in order to cope with his lack of theoretical foundation.

He presented his research proposal to Captain Byrd, who read through it with a slightly bewildered expression.

"If I understand this proposal correctly, you want us to kidnap some dwarf chieftains or other natives with a high genetic aptitude, so you can perform live experiments on them? Do you know how unethical this sounds?"

Ves let out an awkward laugh. "It's not as awful as you think. I'm not about to cut these dwarf chieftains open or anything. Look, you told me to find a way to shield our mechs from their mind voodoo. While I'm somewhat familiar with neural interfaces, it's not my core specialty, and I'm pretty much the most knowledgeable mech designer in this field. So the only way for me to solve this problem is to create a lot of variations of the standard neural interface and let the dwarf potentates go to town with them. Eventually, one of the variants will stick."

This was a rather stupid way of coming up with a solution, but Ves was at his wit's end.

While Captain Byrd didn't seem enthused at the thought of kidnapping the dwarfs and treating them as their lab rats, Ves didn't leave her with an alternative.

Either they did it, or they would have to be resigned with leaving their mechs vulnerable to mental hijacking!

"Fine." She grumbled with tired eyes. Leading this expedition had taken a toll on her mind. "I'll get you your dwarf prisoners."

"You won't regret it, ma'am!" Ves smiled. "The lab rats will be in good hands, don't you worry. It's for a good cause."

Chapter 807 Trial and Error

Once Captain Byrd approved his research proposal, the Vandals moved quickly. They stopped avoiding the tribes and instead tried to seek them out.

The only challenge was trying to identify which wildling possessed the power to interfere with the operation of mechs.

Was every wildling that rode atop a godling a potentate?

Besides offering up their mechs, the Vandals weren't quite sure. In the end, they decided to kidnap the most formidable-looking dwarf and let someone else sort out the problem!

Of course, the Vandals declined to use their mechs to kidnap the dwarves. Not only was it massive overkill, none of the mech pilots wanted to experience the same humiliation of being defeated by a dirty savage on foot!

The security officers went into action this time. It would have been ideal if they could tranquilize the dwarves and pick up their unconscious bodies, but unfortunately their unnaturally strong physiques made it difficult to sedate them without causing their bodies to fail and die.

Instead, the Vandal armorers fabricated electrorods and net launchers to stun and capture the dwarves. In addition, the engineers developed a robotic crawler that could pick up the immobilized dwarves and place them in the cage on its back.

Armed with all of this gear and aided by the large and formidable-looking crawler, the security officers captured about fifteen ferocious dwarves from several small-scale tribes. Though the remaining dwarves howled in anger or grieved at the loss of their strongest warriors, the Vandals didn't show any sympathy.

The dwarves were savages! Most Vandals and Swordmaidens didn't even consider them human anymore.

This was a significant change, because humanity had been brought up with the belief that the human race possessed its own dignity. This belief initially emerged during the Age of Space when a nascent humanity became pressed on all sides by arrogant, old alien civilizations.

It became ingrained in their race once they brutally expanded among the stars during the Age of Conquest. Their constant victories against supposedly superior alien races and their rapid expansion until their race ruled over the largest territory held by any single alien species cemented this manifest destiny.

Humanity was destined to conquer the Milky Way Galaxy!

Technically, no matter how much the genes of the wildlings had diverged from the genes of a baseline human, they should still be counted in the same group. Though it sounded disgusting, these primitive dwarves possessed the ability to interbreed with both the blessed people and any other strains of humanity, including the Vandals and Swordmaidens!

Of course, no one seriously entertained this incredibly repellant act.

Right now, the ground expedition made good progress towards the city of Samar. Fifty kilometers away from the city, the Flagrant Swordmaidens decided to stop and set up another temporary camp at a defensive position.

This also allowed Ves to divert some engineers construct a temporary testing facility. Due to dangers involved with this experiment, the planners placed the testing facility at a fair distance from the main camp. Mechs received clear instructions to avoid the vicinity, which the mech pilots scrupulously obeyed.

No one wanted to lose control over their mechs all of a sudden!

Once the construction bots finished piecing together the prefab testing facility, Ves and Ketis entered the lab.

The interior of the lab incorporated a decent amount of sensors and scanners. It also served as a prison for the dwarf captives. A number of security officers assigned as wardens kept guard over the captured wildlings.

The wardens made sure the dwarf were fed and watered and prevented them from fighting among themselves. The Vandals had to separate the captives in their own holding cells in order to stop them from beating each other up.

As Ves and Ketis stepped into the section housing the holding cells, they came into clear view of the prisoners. The savage dwarves yelled aggressively at their armored forms and spoke in a different incomprehensible language that differed drastically from the tribes they met before.

Each tribe constantly developed their own languages. The dwarves never recorded their knowledge into words, and so their languages remained unmoored. Every hundred years, the language of a tribe shifted so drastically that different generations of tribesmen might not be able to understand each other anymore!

All of the variations made life hell for the translator AIs and prevented Ves from understanding what they said.

He didn't need to, though. Their angry scowls and their fierce shouting already made it abundantly clear how much they hated their captors.

"They look kind of pitiful." Ketis said. While she didn't sympathise with the captives, even she thought Ves was going a little too far with his experiment. "Don't you feel sorry for them sometimes?"

"Human or not, these dwarves are a threat. So long as they are a threat, I can do whatever I want with these prisoners." He replied.

The dumb dwarves still hadn't learned how to use a toilet. The wardens constantly had to send out cleaning bots in order to clean up after their messes. Worse yet, the dwarves always treated the bots as hostiles and tried to attack them every chance they got, so the only way to clean their cells was to restrain them first.

Still, despite their awful behavior and ugly appearances, these dwarves possessed far more potential than the beautiful but stagnant blessed people who holed themselves up in their cities all the time.

Ves needed to remind himself not to hold these dwarves in contempt. Underestimating them had already taught the Swordmaidens a painful lesson.

Once he became satisfied with the testing facility, he immediately began his first tests. Ves designed and constructed a facsimile of a mech cockpit that was more than just a simulator pod.

The neural interfaces incorporated in a cockpit and a simulator pod differed drastically. In order to obtain the best results, Ves had to replicate the circumstances of piloting a mech as closely as possible. However, Captain Byrd forbid him from using a live mech for his experiments, because if a talented dwarf potentate somehow managed to wrest full control over a mech, then that would be a disaster for them all!

However, a cockpit without a mech wouldn't do. Without a way to communicate with the dwarves, how would Ves be able to encourage them to use their mind voodoo?

As Ves struggled to come up with a solution to this problem, Ketis came to the rescue with another one of her stupid-but-genius suggestions.

"They're used to bonding with their godling mounts, right?" She said one day. "Why not create a mech that looks like one of those big lizards and put the test cockpit inside its belly?"

Ves was tempted to smack his face with his gauntlet. "I should have thought of that."

These dwarves may not know what to do when presented with a cockpit or a mech, but they grew up alongside their godling mounts for generations!

Ves quickly designed a godling-like mech that was large enough to accommodate the test cockpit. It didn't have to be a fully-functional mech. In fact, Ves crippled most of its functions to save time and to prevent anyone controlling it from doing any damage.

He incorporated some hardware safeties. When these safeties engaged, the mech pilot wouldn't be able to move the mech at all!

In order to make the fake godling appear more convincing to the dwarf, he even fabricated a fake scaly hide to cover up the test mech's metallic surface.

Now, besides its unnaturally immobile state, the godling mech looked like a decent copy of the real thing!

"We can begin the experiment now." Ves grinned.

While the rest of the Vandals and the Swordmaidens spent their energy on establishing first contact with the ancient city of Samar, Ves holed himself up inside the testing facility.

He first designed a couple of variants of the most common model of neural interfaces utilized by the Vandals. Over the past few days, Ves had developed many possible solutions, but he lacked the confidence and theoretical backing to know for sure whether they would work.

Ves applied each possible solution to different variants and fabricated them personally in a jiffy. He then installed them in the cockpit of the godling mech and tested out their integrity.

Ves didn't know whether these neural interfaces were still safe to use! So before he brought in the dwarfs, he first needed to find out whether the normal two-way man-machine connection would still be stable!

At this stage, Ves required a test pilot.

Understandably, not a single mech pilot wanted to volunteer themselves as his guinea pig!

"Are you crazy?! Do you know how dangerous it is to mess with these neural interfaces? Something like a third of all former mech pilots retired because their cockpits got damaged and screwed up their brains!"

In fact, the actual statistic swung wildly from state to state and from one generation to another. Overall, as cockpits became increasingly more sophisticated in terms of safeguarding their pilots, the rate of forceful retirements due to a loss in neural connectivity steadily decreased.

It still happened a lot. So much so that many mech pilots dreaded the thought of being forced into retirement due to suffering from a faulty neural interface.

To mech pilots, losing their piloting ability in this manner was as awful as if they were men suffering from castration!

Still, Ves needed test pilots to get his experiments going, so Captain Byrd came up with a clever solution.

"Whoever slacks off the most or received the worst performance reviews has to volunteer for testing duty!"

This immediately made most of the dutiful Vandals sigh in relief. Only the worst of the Vandal mech pilots cried and protested, but no one cared about the slackers. Due to the recruiting patterns of the Vandals, many of their servicemen failed to live up to their responsibilities.

Many of the worst mech pilots had already died as the many battles the Flagrant Vandals experienced up to now had filtered them out. Those too incompetent to survive simply hadn't made it as far as the journey to Aeon Corona VII.

Still, some lucky bastards still existed. These cowardly mech pilots that excelled in nothing but saving their own lives finally needed to make their own contribution to the cause!

Escorted by firm-looking security officers, these unwilling mech pilots entered the testing facility and grudgingly entered the cockpit of the godling mech.

Standing behind a control panel in an observation room looking over the testing chamber, Ves began to commence the initial tests.

First, he tested out the standard neural interfaces that received no modifications at all. The test pilot didn't experience anything abnormal.

Once he confirmed that the godling mech worked, Ves proceeded to insert the modified neural interfaces into the cockpit.

The first twelve tests went normal. Ves deliberately designed the cockpit in a way that made it fast and easy for him to switch out the neural interfaces, so he quickly ran through a score of different neural interfaces.

Something finally went wrong with the thirteenth test.

"AHHH! This friggin' hurts!"

The test pilot immediately slammed his fist against the button that caused the experiment to halt. Ves initially didn't want to give the test pilots the option to stop the test on their own initiative, but Captain Byrd forced him to do so.

Ves frowned inside the observation room. The telemetry of the cockpit spiked a bit, but he couldn't make sense of what had happened.

The only way to find out was to ask. He opened a channel to the cockpit.

"What happened? What went wrong?"

"YOU CRAZY MECH DESIGNER! YOU SHOULD BE ARRESTED AND TRIED FOR WAR CRIMES! MY HEAD IS BROKEN! IT HURTS!"

Ves switched off the comm channel. "Okay. Seems like this one is a bust."

He amended his logs and disqualified the thirteenth modified neural interface. Whatever he did to this iteration somehow caused an adverse reaction.

The worst thing about it was that Ves didn't know why.

He shrugged. "That's the nature of trial and error. I'll just have to discover what's safe and what's not by trying them all out."

As a couple of bots brought the mentally-injured mech pilot out of the testing facility onto a stretcher, the next test pilot looked at the pained form of his comrade and gulped.

"Okay, send in the next test pilot!"

The second test pilot began to cry.

Chapter 808 Nightmare of the MTA

For some reason, mech pilots started to avoid Ves whenever he walked across the camp. Even mechs striding in his path started to turn back and take a detour rather than risk coming close to him. Not a single Vandal wanted to catch his attention!

As Ves ate a meal in one of the mess halls, he snorted contemptuously at the frightened mech pilots. Once he entered the prefab facility, all the mech pilots inside immediately made themselves scarce!

"What's the big deal? I'm not even the person who decides the test pilots."

Chief Dakkon sat on the opposite side of the mess table. He partook one of the final pieces of wild god meat the Vandals still had in storage.

Every Vandal and Swordmaiden practically ate the meat for breakfast, lunch and dinner without end! Their reserves of wild god meat rapidly dwindled in a matter of weeks, until there was so little left that only the senior Vandals got to enjoy the final reserves.

"You have to admit that what you are doing is rather gruesome." The chief calmly replied. "From what I heard, there's a one in thirty chance that something goes wrong in your experiments. If you were conducting this experiment in civilized space, the MTA would immediately shut it down and throw you into jail."

Ves smiled sardonically at the chief. "These mech pilots whine too much. Would they rather leave their mechs vulnerable to mental hijacking? It's rather pathetic how the mechs don't even dare to get close to one of the blessed people now. Besides, the only ones who are suffering are the bottom feeders among the mech pilots, and they're not even seriously hurt."

He did not perform these experiments without taking a lot of precautions. He reduced the maximum throughput of data that the test pilot could exchange with the godling mech.

Therefore, even if a faulty neural interface bombarded the test pilot's mind with junk data, the odds of suffering permanent brain damage was fairly low. Most test pilots that suffered a mishap managed to recover after a couple of days of rest.

Participating with his experiments practically gave them a chance to enjoy a couple of vacation days! Slackers loved that, right?

"Did you at least achieve a result or are you needlessly torturing the mech pilots for your own amusement?"

"Pff. Who do you think I am? A mad scientist?" Ves palmed his chest with mock-aggrieved expression. "I'm trying to come up with a solution to this problem in the fastest and most efficient method possible. I don't have the time to undertake a year-long experiment where I have to crawl my way towards a solution. I've been sprinting right from the start."

"The faster you run, the more it hurts when you fall. I'm concerned about your lack of safety precautions. Your disregard of ethics alone is highly concerning. If I'm your supervisor, I would have shut down your experiment immediately. In fact, I would have fired you from your position immediately after."

Ves grinned at the chief engineer. The man was too old and set in his ways. "It's a good thing you're not in charge right now. This is a time of crisis. Everything about this planet reeks of danger. We can't afford to leave any loopholes open. Although these natives are too stupid to realize that they can disable our mechs with their mind powers, who knows what will happen one day."

"Has it been confirmed, then? Are the other dwarves capable of interfering with the man-machine connection."

"Of the fifteen dwarves we've captured, twelve of them are capable of doing so when I finally prodded them into action. They only worked their magic on a simple test neutered mech that's shaped like one of their godling mounts, but we've obtained the same results each time. Worse yet, we hadn't even put any mech pilots inside, but they dwarves still managed to wrest control over the test mech regardless!"

As long as any mech was online, the dwarves and the city folk could potentially exert control over it! After he showed the results to Captain Byrd and Commander Lydia, his research became even more acute!

The commanding officers felt an unprecedented fear for the genetically-modified natives. Although they only kidnapped the chieftains and the strongest looking dwarves, who knew how many of their kind shared this ability? And if the wildlings could do so, the worshippers of the sacred gods could certainly do so as well!

This entire planet was a breeding ground for mech-hijacking freaks!

Chief Dakkon realized the seriousness of the situation. He understood now why Ves didn't fear running afoul of the MTA. That was because the galaxy-spanning organization would probably be frightened out of their wits about these variation humans as well!

Right now, the natives were the common enemy of all mech pilots and mech designers!

"Have you at least progressed to a solution?"

"It's only been a week since I began my experiments and I've already produced some partial results. Certain modifications somehow hinder the ability of the dwarves to connect with the neural interface. The best iteration still isn't able to block an outside influence, but it's at least capable of reducing the intensity of the foreign data stream."

Ves did not fear any reproach because he produced results! As long as none of the test pilots dropped dead one day, he could do anything he wanted.

He needed more test pilots? After sending a quick message, they'd be delivered to his testing facility, kicking and screaming all the while.

He wanted more dwarves? After sending another message, the security officers went out and hunted down one of the nearby tribes and casually ripped their leaders and greatest warriors from their family and tribesmen.

The Vandals only denied his request to obtain one of the blessed people. That went a bridge too far, apparently.

"How are the negotiations with Samar proceeding?"

"Not very good." Chief Dakkon grimaced. "For a former industrial center, Samar is even worse than Mulak when it comes to technology. The moment the city saw our mechs, they sent out all of their sacred gods in an attempt to add them to their pile of treasures! These Samarrans worship technology!"

The abundant amount of technological wrecks somehow warped the blessed people of Samar into worshipping them. Even if it was a broken refrigerator, the citizens would prostrate in front of them and ascribe inexplicable feats such as blessing their health or giving them extra strength.

They went completely mad with religious fervor!

So when a handful of large and functional mechs came into view, pretty much the entire city went into an ecstatic fervor. Worst of all, the beast riders and the sacred gods that ruled the city were actually the most fanatic members of this cult!

The Vandal analysts even believe the worship of technology originated from the ignorant sacred gods who admired them for their shininess! From what they could gather, each of the sacred gods of Samar hoarded technological remnants like how dragons hoarded treasures in the stories.

The only way the unprepared first contact delegation managed to avoid a titanic clash was because they quickly ran away.

The sacred gods may be powerful, but they were never fast!

"So what now?" Ves asked.

"We've been trying to communicate with the Samarrans by throwing written messages towards their cities. Sadly, we don't even know if they can still read!"

The Samarrans treated every piece of technology as a treasure, so when the Vandals attempted to send out a bot, the sacred god that went out to receive it directly gulped it down!

Just as Ves was about to respond, a tremor ran through the entire camp. All of the tables, chairs and their plates began to vibrate! The tremor only lasted for a few seconds before trailing off.

"What's going on?"

Suddenly, a stronger tremor shook the ground. This time, the Vandals definitely detected something wrong. An alarm quickly ran throughout the entire camp.

"ALERT! ORBITAL BOMBARDMENT IS UNDERWAY IN THIS REGION!"

"Damn!" Ves cursed. He sent a serious glance towards Chief Dakkon before they abandoned their meals and joined the panicking Vandals out the mess hall.

Once outside, Ves took a look in the skies. Besides the flood of yellow-golden astral winds high up in the sky, Ves made out faint trails of objects plunging through the atmosphere. The friction of the air around the artificial meteorites caused them to stand out in the air.

"There's twelve of them!"

"Thirteen!"

"They're continuing to pour in! Who the hell is bombarding us?! How many artificial meteorites have they prepared?!"

"GET TO YOUR STATIONS! FOLLOW THE ANTI-BOMBARDMENT PLAN!"

Every Vandal already became familiar with many different contingency plans.

They actually predicted the possibility of becoming the target of orbital bombardment. Even though the chaotic spacetime distortion made it impossible to aim an artificial meteorite at a specific coordinate, as long as you threw enough meteorites in the same direction, then one of them would probably land on target eventually!

The sheer amount of artificial meteorites plunging from the atmosphere continued to land in a very wide region that encompassed both their camp and the city of Samar.

One meteorite actually plunged with incredible force just twenty kilometers away from the city walls! The sheer kinetic energy released by the impact caused a humongous crater to form and damaged the nearest side of the city through the subsequent shockwave.

This indiscriminate bombardment threatened to become the city's holocaust!

Ves didn't run towards the workshops. Instead, he ran towards the headquarters bunker. As an underground structure, it possessed a bit more resilience towards orbital bombardment.

However, it was wholly insufficient should an artificial meteorite land directly on top of the camp! None of them could help it, because the planet's extremely strong gravity amplified the damage these meteorites inflicted to its surroundings upon impact.

As Ves entered the headquarters, he walked past the panicking operators working frantically behind their consoles.

"The fleet just sent a messenger from orbit! They're informing us that the pirate fleet consisting of the Caged and the Red Tongs are bombarding us right now! They've prepared an estimated two-hundred artificial meteorites!"

"Two-hundred meteorites!? That's enough to devastate this entire region!"

Every Vandal within earshot scowled or grimaced. They defeated the Caged before, and actually spared them in favor of crushing the Masters of Combat. Instead of feeling grateful for the Vandals for sparing them, the Caged instead traded their old partner for a new one and paid back the Vandals by throwing giant metallic rocks at them! And not just a couple, but two-hundred at once!

Due to the fickle astral winds, the meteorites all flew off-course as they plunged down from the skies. Some zigged, others zagged, but the most dangerous ones were those who zigged off-course but then zagged back on-course!

Neither the Vandals or the Swordmaidens attempted to shoot at the artificial meteorites. There was no point! Neither of them brought any ballistic or kinetic weapons because the planet's gravity would simply pull them down to the ground too soon. As for their considerable amount of laser armament, while they could deal a considerable amount of damage, they possessed one fatal flaw.

Laser weapons couldn't knock an artificial meteorite off-course! In fact, all the laser cannons of their Akkara mechs didn't even possess enough kinetic energy to open a door! While they inflicted more than enough heat damage to melt or vaporize any door straight away, but when it came to pushing solid objects, even a three-year old toddler hit harder!

This was simple physics, and only more advanced or exotic energy weapons generated enough kinetic energy to knock a solid object off-course.

Therefore, the contingency plan basically consisted of a simple principle.

"Spread out and hunker down!"

Perhaps in civilized space, a force would show some scruples about bombarding a planet with artificial meteorites. It happened every now and then, but only enough to take out a particularly hardened target.

Anyone who unscrupulously flung artificial meteorites towards a population planet quickly earned the ire of the MTA!

Unfortunately, the Aeon Corona System was as far away from civilized space as ever. With neither of the Big Two able to extend their influence in this closed star system, anyone could bomb the hell out of the surface of the planet and receive no repercussions!

The only hope the Flagrant Swordmaidens had against this disaster from the skies was to pray that their spaceborn forces would be able to catch up to the pirate fleet and halt their bombardment!

Chapter 809 Rain from the Skies

Orbital bombardment! If there was anything that brought landbound mechs despair, then having giant objects thrown at you from the sky topped the list.

No one on the surface possessed the power to withstand bombardment from orbit!

While plenty of advanced ground weapons existed that could give ships orbiting leisurely above a planet's atmosphere a nasty surprise, none of the forces and outfits in the Aeon Corona System could afford such extravagant toys.

Neither the Vandals nor the Swordmaidens possessed any means to withstand hundreds of tons of metals and minerals fused together into a single, resilient package.

Perhaps if they threw everything at a single artificial meteorite, they might be able to fracture it and cause it to crumble into smaller pieces.

Yet those pieces would still descend along the same course!

Besides, with dozens of artificial meteorites already being flung from orbit and at least a hundred more prepared to be thrown down as well, there was nothing anyone could do to stop this calamity that approximated a force of nature!

"The Sixteenth Reconnaissance Squad has been hit directly by a meteorite! All of the mechs and mech pilots of the squad has been wiped out!"

"Twenty swordsman mechs of Lydia's Swordmaidens have been flung aside from the shockwave of a nearby impact! All of their mechs have sustained heavy damage!"

"The south side of the camp has been swept by a shockwave! Hundreds of Vandals and Swordmaidens out in the open are affected! Over twenty of their suits report no life signs anymore!"

The entire headquarters continued to report disaster after disaster. While most meteorites diverged by as much as a thousand kilometers from the camp, at least ten percent of the meteorites landed within a hundred kilometer radius.

Sooner or later, the meteorites would hit close enough to wipe out the entire camp! This was all a function of probability! The chance of a single direct hit might be low, but the Caged and the Red Tongs compensated for that by preparing an abundant amount of artificial meteorites.

The Roppongan gangers and the Ravienne Alliance pirates were determined to wipe out the formidable ground forces of the Vandals and the Swordmaidens by the most direct, violent and overbearing fashion as possible!

Ordinarily, the Flagrant Swordmaidens in orbit should have covered the forces on the ground, but their preoccupation with their mining activities on one of the five moons had diverted them from their guard duties too much.

The pirates and the Vesians that managed to enter the Aeon Corona System all competed for the moons, and the fleet under the leadership of Major Verle had directly monopolized the most mineral-rich moon!

This caused the Flagrant Swordmaidens to divert too much of their spaceborn assets to the moon, leaving their orbital presence a little too bare.

Now they paid for it as the pirates somehow managed to discover the trail of the Flagrant Swordmaiden ground forces!

During times like these, Ves felt very small. No matter if he wore his customized C22 Earth Ant. No matter if he was armed with the Cadisis and the Amastendira. No matter if he possessed a pair of high-powered gadgets that lent itself well to spycraft.

He suddenly realized that none of that mattered in the face of this disaster that approached an extinction event!

This disaster actually didn't affect the Flagrant Swordmaidens so much as the natives and the wildlife in this entire region.

Hundreds of thousands of animal herds got wiped out entirely by the impact or by the shockwaves that followed after.

Even a wild god that got hit directly by an artificial meteorite got pounded out of existence, with barely a scrap of its meat and bone left intact to tell the creature once existed!

The wildling tribes all screeched towards the sky and either panicked or bent down in worship at the unprecedented sight.

As for the blessed people, two sides of the wall around Samar crumbled entirely!

Those walls were up to fifteen meters thick and consisted of solid alloy! However, in the face of death from the vault of the gods, no one was exempt from suffering!

Of course, none of the Vandals cared about the blessed and cursed people now. All they cared about was tiding over this crisis.

As long as they survived, they could recover!

Ves hunkered down next to a couple of other experts in an out-of-the-way compartment inside the bunker. He held very little confidence that the fragile prefab bunker would be able to hold out if an artificial meteorite landed within five to ten kilometers of the camp.

Each artificial meteorite landed with enough force to wipe out an entire city! They were even more destructive than tactical nuclear weapons in that regard, especially when the planet's gravity pulled them down with greater force!

"What is our fleet doing?!" Someone hissed. "We're dying out here!"

The ground continually rumbled as meteorites landed close or far away. Even an impact hundreds of kilometers away found a way to shake their location. This only highlighted the threat of any single meteorite.

The Caged and the Tongs invested a lot of time and effort into fashioning these artificial meteorites together! They probably wanted to wipe out the ground forces of the Flagrant Swordmaidens in one fell swoop!

Just as Ves didn't think it could get any worse, a huge earthquake suddenly shook the bunker. A flash of heat and energy ran through his body, and for a moment he thought that a meteorite slammed directly in the camp.

"What happened?!"

"We've detected an antimatter explosion in orbit! The estimated yield of the explosion has reached approximately 300 to 900 megatons!"

Antimatter explosion! None of the Vandals could stay calm when they heard that. Anti-matter bombs was one of the superweapons of the past, able to crack a continent at their weakest or blow up an entire planet at their worst!

The fury of the explosion in orbit surpassed the dreadful impacts of the artificial meteorites cratering the surface of the planet. Every Vandal had grown numb. Nobody knew where the antimatter explosion came from, but if another somehow landed in their camp, the entire region would cease to exist!

As the numbness faded, so did the meteorite impacts. However, smaller impacts continued to rain down from the sky in a much higher frequency.

Half an hour passed as the Vandals quietly discovered that no more meteorites rained down. So far, only about fifty of them fell from the skies, of which only a small proportion landed close enough to damage the Flagrant Swordmaidens.

Had they survived?

"Why did it stop?"

Ves left the bunker along with a couple of other people. When they moved outside, they looked above their heads and saw nothing at all except for the astral winds encompassing the entire sky like clouds.

What had happened beyond those winds?

It took some time for a shuttle from the fleet to descend from orbit and reach the camp. It brought news from the fleet!

The first revelation it brought was that the spaceborn mechs and ships of the Caged and the Red Tongs were wiped out to the last mech before they could drop all of their artificial meteorities!

The second revelation was that the reason why they were wiped out was because an antimatter torpedo homed in on their fleet and blasted them all to bits in a huge, all-encompassing explosion!

Nothing survived! Due to their activities, the pirates had kept their fleet and mechs in a tight formation, and this because their downfall as the antimatter explosion affected them all without exception!

The smaller impacts the Vandals felt came from the larger pieces of debris that survived reentry. The damage they dealt upon impact was considerable, with some of the larger hull fragments even surpassing the damage dealt by the artificial meteorites.

The only consolation was that the debris hadn't been aimed at the camp, so instead they dispersed over many different areas.

"Where did the antimatter torpedo come from?"

This became the most critical question of all. As a taboo weapon, the use of antimatter weapons was a huge violation. The CFA and MTA hunted down any force that made use of weapons of mass destruction without any exception!

Not even the first-rate superstates dared to cross the line on this matter!

However, only a handful of organizations received an exemption from the restrictions against the use of weapons of mass destruction.

"According to the fleet, they traced the trajectory of the antimatter torpedo back to the presumed location of the Starlight Megalodon!"

The Vandals became numb yet again. So many inconceivable things happened today that they could hardly process the revelations.

As a battleship of the CFA, the Starlight Megalodon almost certainly carried her own arsenal of weapons of mass destruction. Antimatter torpedoes used to be employed as a way to annihilate an enemy fleet in a single blow!

As one of the two guardian organizations of humanity, the CFA strictly prohibited other human forces from employing weapons of mass destruction.

However, they themselves didn't adhere to their own rules. As much as these weapons had scarred the human race, they still had their uses, particularly against the hostile alien civilizations that didn't play by any rules.

The use of weapons of mass destruction could only ever be deployed against the common enemies of humanity! Never again would they turn these dreadful extinction weapons against themselves.

So the fact that the Starlight Megalodon was capable of launching an antimatter torpedo hadn't fazed the Vandals at all.

The astonishing matter was that the battleship had moved into action in the first place!

Over three-hundred years had passed since the battleship went missing. On the surface of Aeon Corona VII, at least three-thousand years have passed due to the spacetime distortion effecting the entire planet.

Due to the enormous passage of time as well as the other weirdness surrounding the Starlight Megalodon, none of the Flagrant Swordmaidens believed the battleship was still operational.

Yet now, they needed to revise that assumption!

Even if the Starlight Megalodon experienced several millenia, she somehow managed to retain enough functionality to detect the activities of the Caged and the Red Tongs and launch an antimatter torpedo towards their fleet to put a stop to their destructive activities.

"She's still alive! How is that possible!?"

"Who is crewing that battleship? It's impossible to run a capital ship without tens of thousands of personnel!"

Perhaps the original crew still clung to life somehow and maintained the operations of the Starlight Megalodon. Perhaps they raised a proper strain of descendants and insured these people would be able to inherit their functions over generations.

What mattered was that if the Starlight Megalodon could launch a single antimatter torpedo, she could easily launch another! Battleships never carried only one torpedo.

Ves had no time to think about that, though. Now that the rain from the skies had stopped, the Vandals and the Swordmaidens each needed to recover.

During the orbital bombardment, most mechs had been stationed at some distance outside the camp. They went on patrol or scouted the terrain ahead. Once the crisis hit, the mechs all split up and tried to disperse as much as possible.

There was no point in concentrating their mechs!

The more the mechs dispersed, the lower the chance of losing a bunch of them at once if an artificial meteorite happened to land on top of them. Only the camp remained vulnerable, but they couldn't do anything about that. Dismantling the camp and moving out their heavy transports required at least several hours of preparation time.

When the damage figures finally poured in, Ves found out that at least nine Vandal mechs and mech pilots were lost without any hope of recovery. About forty mechs received severe damage that required a significant amount of time to fix. The camp also received significant shockwave damage, injuring and killing numerous Vandals who hadn't made it to a shelter in time.

The Swordmaidens suffered an equivalent amount of damage.

All in all, the orbital bombardment significantly impacted overall strength of the ground forces! If not for the Starlight Megalodon's retaliation, the damage could have been much more worse!

Chapter 810 After the Rain

The infirmaries of both the Vandals and the Swordmaidens filled up with their injured. The bodies of scores of servicemen, pirates and slaves temporarily piled up in a freezing container.

Throughout the chaotic, dust-laden camp, heavy transports conveyed several scarred and deformed mechs to the prefab workshops.

Life must go on!

The mission stayed the same. No matter how awful the events of yesterday impacted the ground forces, the survivors had to clench their teeth and do their best to pick up their duties.

Not much news arrived from the fleet after the initial status update. The Flagrant Swordmaidens in orbit remained as ignorant as those on the ground.

Except for figuring out that the Starlight Megalodon likely launched the torpedo as a reaction against the indiscriminate orbital bombardment, they couldn't figure out much else. The dense concentration of astral winds made observation from orbit impossible.

Ves suspended his experiments in order to supervise the repair process in person. None of the other mech designers but him could draft up a repair plan for each damaged mech that wasted the least amount of resources.

Having done this many times before, he only needed to spend a half hour at most to go over the state of each damaged mech and point out which parts needed to be replaced and which parts could be restored.

With the limited stockpile of resources at hand, the Vandals couldn't afford to replace every broken part that could still be restored.

Most of the damage actually consisted of dented armor plating and deformed parts. Many of the mechs lost their antigrav field when they became affected by their proximity to a meteorite impact. This exacerbated their fall damage and gave the mech technicians a lot of headaches.

"It's too wasteful to replace these armor plating with new ones. Just pound them back into shape!"

Mech armor plating was made up of highly advanced alloys that couldn't easily be recycled with field equipment. Only their logistics ships up in orbit possessed the capacity to recycle damaged armor plating down to their base materials. After that, it might take several hours to fabricate a completely new plate from those recovered materials.

If the Vandals made use of the formidable capabilities of the logistics ships, then the damaged mechs would easily be able to regain their peak strength.

It took way too much time and effort to do so, though. The damaged mechs didn't need to be restored to a near-perfect state. Ves was fine with straightening out the dents and deformities. Even though the bending and unbending weakened the structure of the armor plating, the Vandals really couldn't afford to spend too much time in one place.

They still needed to move!

Therefore, Ves prioritized the repair of the internal components over the armor plating because restoring the former directly restored the battle capabilities of the mech while the latter only increased its level of protection.

"Hopefully the Ancient City of Samar won't do anything crazy during this time."

The disaster destroyed half the city walls and even knocked down some of the resilient metal structures in the outer districts of the city. Thousands of blessed people lost their lives, and tens of thousands sustained various injuries.

The Flagrant Swordmaidens saw an opportunity in this. They possessed vastly superior medical technology. When they began to offer to help out with treating the injured, the tech-crazy fanatics finally showed some clarity.

Collecting technological baubles may be fine and dandy, but saving the lives of their citizens mattered more!

However, a new threat began to emerge from the city.

"The more aggressive sacred gods of Samar are angry." Ketis told him as he finalized the repair plan of the last damaged mech under his purview. "The exobeasts aren't as sympathetic to their injured subjects. The blessed people are servants to them. If a bunch of them die, they only need to wait a couple of decades for them to replenish their numbers."

"What are they angry about, then?" Ves asked.

"They're angry about the orbital bombardment. The sacred gods don't believe it's a coincidence that they became the victim of it shortly after we've arrived to attempt to trade with their city. Both our arrivals happened to coincide together that they can't help but draw a connection between us and the rocks that almost pulverized their domain."

Ves grimaced. "We didn't do it. Even our camp suffered under the same bombardment!"

"You know that, I know that, every Vandal and Swordmaiden knows that. Yet to the natives, everything that's foreign and comes from beyond the vault of the gods are connected."

"So what are they plotting at this moment?"

"There's a split between the sacred gods. The aggressive faction is trying to drum up support for an attack. They want to take the offensive and attack our camp!"

That caused Ves to pause. An attack would be really bad for them for several reasons! "How many sacred gods does Samar have?"

"Twelve! That's not all. Their sacred gods are older and better fed. The area around Samar isn't as barren as the wastelands around Mulak. If one of the sacred gods want to enjoy a feast, they could easily lumber out of the city and slowly catch up to one of the animal herds. That's also why the sacred gods are pissed. The meteorites probably wiped out a lot of the beast herds in the wild!"

Ves began to imagine the result of twelve sacred gods assaulting the camp at the same time. The distance between the camp and the city wasn't very far. Depending on how fast the sacred gods moved, they could reach the camp within half a day or less.

That wasn't enough time to evacuate the camp, especially when around eighty damaged mechs weighed down the Vandals and Swordmaidens!

Unless the ground forces decisively abandoned all eighty mechs as well as at least half of their supplies, they had no choice but to make a stand and repel the sacred gods.

If the leader of the sacred god possessed as much power as Hokaz, then sustaining further losses became a certainty!

Still, Ves possessed enough confidence that their remaining mechs possessed enough firepower to take out the sacred gods from a distance. The only issue that worried him was whether they could kill or frighten off the sacred gods long enough to spare their camp from the wrath of the gods.

All of this was out of his hands, though. He wasn't involved with the negotiations this time because the city didn't employ any mechs. In fact, none of the ruined factories that occupied much of the city's territory consisted of mech factories.

Just like Mulak, the inhabitants of Samar all depended on their sacred gods for protection.

"I wouldn't be too worried about the sacred gods, though." Ketis grinned at Ves. "Since we know they might be coming, we've prepared some traps for these beasts. None of the natives can match us when it comes to warfare."

"You're right." Ves calmed down a little. "The sacred gods are extremely formidable in combat, but it's too easy to circumvent their strengths and take advantage of their weaknesses."

For the time being, Ves threw himself back to work. After arranging all the repair jobs, he left the mech technicians to their devices and returned to his lab to finish his experiments.

Since combat against the sacred gods loomed over the horizon, it became more important than ever to shield their mechs from the mental influence of their beast riders!

Anything could happen in a battle. If the beast riders ever found out their mental powers could interfere with the functioning of a mech, then the Flagrant Swordmaidens wouldn't be able to employ their melee mechs!

Ever since the ground forces landed, the melee mech pilots generally had an awful time. Most of the time, the ranged mechs became the star of the show, leaving the melee mechs as their escorts.

Their awkward circumstances on this planet caused a lot of dissatisfaction. Many times, they grumbled about mixing up with the natives, Captain Orfan most of all.

As far as she was concerned, attempting to trade with the ancient cities was a giant distraction from their mission!

They should have just continued onwards towards the Starlight Megalodon!

Of course, she conveniently neglected their energy budget deficit. Without enough juice to propel their mechs and transports, they wouldn't even make it through halfway.

A couple of days passed by as the Vandals and the Swordmaidens did their best to fix up their damaged mechs and restore their capabilities. Ves poured into the experiments, putting greater emphasis on speed at the cost of safety.

He even caught some flack from Captain Byrd because his reckless experiments sent more and more mech pilots to the infirmary with awful headaches.

He had a simply reply to her concerns. "Now that we're in the process of repairing all of those damaged mechs, many of our mech pilots are out of mechs. Since they have nothing to do right now, they might as well be useful in my lab."

She couldn't argue with his logic.

Though his breakneck pace of research caused a lot of mech pilots to curse him behind his back, his progress accelerated equally as fast. As mech pilots continued to be brought out of the testing facility on stretchers and clutching their heads, Ves became ever closer to developing an effective configuration for the neural interfaces.

Over the span of a few days, Ves managed to reduce the influence of foreign connections from fifty percent to eighty percent. However, his quick progressed stalled at that point. He already exhausted his bag of tricks at this time.

If Ves wanted to make further progress, he needed to incorporate more drastic changes to the neural interface.

That was risky. Ves didn't fully comprehend the construction of a neural interface. Making basic modifications was within his limit, but going further drastically increased the risk.

Ves had to make a judgement call here. Should he increase the danger of his experiments and try to come up with a more perfect solution, or should he call it a day and be satisfied with what he had?

Right now, an eighty percent reduction in the intensity of the foreign connection meant that mech pilots possessed the ability to fight back and repel any foreign influences. They retained enough strength to maintain control over their mechs and shield their minds from external attacks, though they couldn't keep up their guard for long.

It was a partial solution, but at least it gave the mech pilots a fighting chance.

Ves looked on as a captured dwarf chieftain extended his hand towards the test mech camouflaged as a godling mech. This time, Ves had disengaged all the safeties. The mech was a fully functional machine which moved as fast and heavy as a real godling.

It could even destroy the entire testing facility if it went out of control!

Of course, Ves also incorporated a killswitch inside the test mech. As this wasn't a real mech anyway, he didn't feel any burden about adding that feature to the test machine.

The dwarf chieftain began to work his magic. After hundreds of repetitions, Ves unintentionally trained the captured dwarves like Pavlov's dogs. Each time they exerted their remote interfacing abilities, they received a sumptuous nutrient pack!

For some reason, the dwarves absolutely loved to eat the contents of a nutrient pack! Fruit flavors happened to be their favorite.

Ves chuckled at how easy it was to manipulate these dwarves. It took a lot of beatings for them to become docile enough to cooperate with his experiments. He still hadn't managed to teach them to use the toilet, but he couldn't have everything.

"Ahh! It hurts! My head is pounding!" The test pilot yelled over the comm channel. "Why isn't the experiment stopping?! I pressed the button! I pressed the friggin' button!"

"Tough it up, pilot." Ves replied. "This experiment needs to go on for at least ten minutes straight, but you test pilots always shut it down within the first minute. That's why I disabled the emergency shutdown button! You've got nine minutes left to go, so don't be a pansy and endure!"

"AAAAHHH! You heartless bastard!"