

Chapter 811 Mental Resilience

Despite the violent cursing of the test pilots, they largely managed to survive the endurance tests.

Some mech pilots failed.

Some mech pilots succeeded.

Ves recognized that the determining factor for success was genetic aptitude and willpower. Those whose minds adapted better to their mechs and possessed firmer wills tended to be more resilient against outside interference.

The polluting thoughts of the dwarves was like a virus. They only posed a serious threat to the mech pilots if their minds were brittle.

Unfortunately, many Vandal and Swordmaiden mech pilots didn't possess much promise in their genetic aptitudes. The rank-and-file mostly exhibited a lower-than-average genetic aptitude, so the vast majority of them couldn't rely on their piloting talent to withstand any intrusions in their man-machine connection.

As for willpower, perhaps only ten percent of the Vandal mech pilots possessed strong enough minds to endure for ten whole minutes.

Ves didn't expect a mind struggle to last that long on the battlefield. It was already good enough if a mech pilot could withstand the foreign pressure long enough to kill the source or move out of range from the attack.

"The Swordmaidens are probably best at bearing through the pain."

To confirm his guess that willpower was the decisive factor, he borrowed a couple of Swordmaiden test pilots. The women didn't come willingly, having heard all the horror stories of what went on in his lab.

That didn't matter, though. Commander Lydia agreed with the test and figured her Swordmaidens could use some toughening up.

Indeed, the results matched his expectations. Even the weakest-minded Swordmaidens performed better than the average Vandal mech pilot. Their rigorous training and discipline allowed them to bear the foreign thoughts sent out by the dwarf captives with hardly any impact on their performance.

When Ves laid out all the results in a conference meeting, Captain Byrd looked at the mech pilots in the room and shook her head.

The mech pilots all appeared subdued when Ves gave his report. They still wanted to avoid him like the plague!

"You say that your best achievement so far is an eighty percent reduction in intensity." Captain Byrd said. "Is there no way to provide our mech pilots with complete immunity against this attack?"

Ves grimaced. He hated to leave a job undone, but his inability left him with little choice. "Unlikely. I'm already working out of my depth here, hence all the trial and error attempts. Now that I've applied all the basic solutions I can come up with, I'll have to take an undue amount of risks in search of an even better solution. Suffering permanent brain damage won't be out of the question anymore if I do so."

All the mech pilots showed some panic once he mentioned the possibility. None of them wanted his experiments to go on!

"Enough is enough!" Captain Orfan yelled. "Eighty percent is enough! We're strong enough to shoulder the rest, isn't that right, guys?"

"I agree with you, ma'am!"

"Yeah!"

"It's our own fault if we lose control of our mechs then!"

Ves looked at the mech officers and grinned a little bit. He silently discounted at least half of them. From what he gathered from his tests, it took a focused and strong-willed mind to endure the influence of a third mind in the man-machine connection.

That meant someone like Captain Orfan would actually be able to bear the strain. She had confidence in spades!

As for the other mech pilots and mech officers, Ves held much less expectations. Some of them were rather decent while others didn't possess the right mindset to excel in their profession.

One of the major deficiencies of the Flagrant Vandals had always been their lack of skilled and talented personnel.

The Swordmaidens suffered from the same problem, but the difference was that Commander Lydia selected promising gems from the frontier and brutally trained them until they shaped up to be elites among pirates.

In terms of willpower, confidence and projection of strength, the Swordmaidens actually beat the servicemen in this regard!

Ves found that to be rather pathetic! As members of a military mech regiment, the Vandals didn't conform to standards. Their unconventional esprit the corps may be able to bind them together, but it didn't actually make a serious attempt at uniting their minds as one!

As for the Swordmaidens, much of their individuality had been drilled out of their bones out in order to fit them in the same mold. They were Swordmaidens first, and individuals second.

As for the Vandals, they were self-serving bastards first, and Vandal bastards second.

The things he learned about willpower through his experiments gave him a lot of insights in the nature of mech pilots.

The contrast between the bastard Vandals and the disciplined Swordmaidens taught him that willpower wasn't an intrinsic quality. It could be trained!

Ves guessed that may be why expert pilots overwhelmingly tended to emerge from the willpower. Only rarely did they pop up among mercenary or pirate outfits.

However, the existence of outfits like Lydia's Swordmaidens showed that the military didn't hold a monopoly on the practice of instilling discipline and willpower in their mech pilots.

The reason why Ves paid a lot of attention to this was because he intended to take advantage of the insights he gained. Once he finally returned home, he planned to overhaul the Avatars of Myth and attempt to turn them into an elite personal force if his cousin Melkor hadn't done so yet.

As much as he developed a minor kinship with the Flagrant Vandals, Ves disliked their undisciplined aspects. He did not want his principal bodyguards to be as sloppy and dubious as the Vandals. He'd much rather shape his retinue into something more dependable like the Swordmaidens who could be trusted to follow orders without slacking off.

In any case, right now Captain Byrd needed to decide whether to continue the research or end it here. Due to the vehemence of the other mech pilots and the advice of Ves, she had no choice but to leave this problem half-solved.

"Alright. We'll stop at this level of progress. Mr. Larkinson, please slowly install this modified neural interface into our mechs one by one. Every mech with the new neural interface needs to undergo extensive testing before it's allowed to resume their usual duties. Is that clear?"

He nodded. "Yes, ma'am. Can I share this innovation with the Swordmaidens?"

"Please do. They are our allies and they need the new neural interfaces more than us."

With this development, the Swordmaiden melee mech pilots would no longer fear engaging the natives in melee range.

Ves wasn't finished though. "Captain Byrd, I have another suggestion. I'd like to keep the testing facility operational and retain all the dwarf captives. From my experiments, I found out that any test pilot that undergoes multiple endurance tests become increasingly more capable of resisting outside influences. I'd like to turn this experiment into a regular exercise and have every Vandal go through what is essentially a mental disciplining exercise."

"No! Don't torture us you crazy mech designer!"

"No, please, no!"

"Stop it! You got what you wanted!"

Both Ves and Captain Byrd ignored the bleating mech officers.

As a calm and rational officer, Captain Byrd stood above these petty concerns. "What are the benefits?"

Ves had to be careful in describing this. He had a lot of suspicions, but could only mention the things he knew for sure. "It's unlikely that our mech pilots will directly improve in their performance, but their tolerance for pain and mental pain will constantly grow. This allows them to remain clear-minded and free from the distraction of pain and battle damage. That aside, it also enables them to maintain their composure if any of the natives attempt to take control over their mechs."

These benefits alone sounded incredibly attractive to Captain Byrd, though the mech pilots who actually had to go through this torture disagreed.

"What are the drawbacks?"

"Well have to arrange transportation for the testing facility and the testing mech. We also have to accommodate the dwarf captives over a longer term. I'm unsure whether they will be able to maintain their strength and ferocity during long-term captivity. We may need to replace the older captives with new ones in order to give our mech pilots a good mental exercise."

Some of the dwarf captives had become a little too used to the luxuries of captivity. Instead of toiling for survival in the wild, the former chieftain and warriors leisurely spent their time in their cells and had their food delivered to them at constant intervals.

Ves had noticed a drop in intensity lately whenever he carted out the dwarf captives in front of the testing mech.

Realizing that he pampered the formerly ferocious dwarves, he began to change up their routine in order to restore some of their wildness. In fact, he handed this task over to Ketis, who seemed uniquely suited at this job.

Grinning all the while, she began to make life hard for the dwarves. Not only did she wake them up in their cells at random moments, she also sent some security officers in their cells to bully them or beat them up.

In order to make their life a struggle, she decreased the intake of food. Instead of three nutrient packs a day, they only subsided on a single one per day.

That was pure torture for these dwarves as they required a huge amount of calories to sustain themselves, especially because their cells fell outside of the influence of the antigrav fields.

In order to encourage them to be cruel, she pitted them together in makeshift sparring matches. The winner received an extra nutrient pack for the day while the loser had to watch with envy as his rival consumed a precious meal.

The harsh but effective methods that Ketis came up with spurred some of the dwarves into a greater frenzy, but it also broke some of the weaker dwarves into giving up. Right now, five of the captives had devolved into traumatized dummies.

The testing facility needed fresh blood!

"If you think it is feasible and safe to do so, then I'll approve it." Captain Byrd finally decided over pretty much everyone's objections. She became so annoying by their blathering that she finally snapped. "Shut up! Are you Vandals or are you chickens?! Don't you realize that this is a rare opportunity to exercise your minds? We need to be as strong as possible for when we finally encounter the other forces at the Starlight Megalodon, and this is one of the only ways we can strengthen ourselves!"

"But Captain, this is torture! Our nerves will wear out if we go through this barbaric practice."

Ves spoke up. "Technically, there's a high chance your nerves will undergo a lot of strain and be overburdened for a time, particularly if you undergo this exercise too often. However, it's just like exercising your muscles. Train too hard and your body will break. Train too little and your body won't be stimulated to improve. Right now, we've hit a sweet spot where the intensity is a bit high but not to the point of risking permanent brain damage."

"According to who?!"

"According to me."

"You told us yourself that you're not an expert in this field! You're a mech designer, not a doctor! What do you know about brains?!"

"All the doctors I've consulted have concluded that the test pilots that have participated in my experiments are fine. That should be sufficient proof."

Naturally, the mech officers remained highly opposed, but their objections didn't matter. They all had to follow orders! If Captain Byrd told them to go through with the exercise, then they had no choice but to do it, because they were servicemen!

Just like Ves, she knew that most of them were rather lacking in terms of firmness and willpower. If the Vandals could polish up the mental resilience of their mech pilots through these unconventional means, then their odds of success would definitely increase!

In fact, part of the reason why Ves wanted to continue with this activity was because he suspected that it might even be useful in disciplining his own forces.

If he could simulate the unique and all-encompassing mental strain imposed on the mech pilots by the dwarf captives through artificial means, then he'd be able to develop the perfect training machine to increase the mental resilience of the mech pilots under his service!

With such a training method, his Avatars of Myth would be able to match the Swordmaidens in mental resilience without necessarily having to undergo a decade of intensive training.

Of course, this was a very stupid and mindless way of training mental resilience. It only increased a mech pilot's tolerance for mental pain. It did not discipline their minds, increase their belonging to their units or bring any other benefits.

The Avatars of Myth still needed to undergo an intensive training regime, but with this extra training method, they would have an edge over most private outfits.

Chapter 812 Training Regime

Once Captain Byrd approved of the mental resilience training, Ves returned to the testing facility and converted it to an exercise facility.

In order to save the Vandals the trouble of assembling and disassembling the exercise facility each time they set up camp elsewhere, Ves began to move the cells and the exercise equipment to the cargo space of a heavy transport.

He reduced the amount of space it took to conduct the exercises by decommissioning many old testing equipment. In order to save space and increase the throughput, Ves dismantled the testing mech and stripped it down to the cockpit.

He also fabricated another cockpit so that two mech pilots would be able to 'enjoy' their training session at the same time. This also allowed him to offer his services to the Swordmaidens.

While technicians and machinists took them away to be recycled, Ves rapidly led a team of other technicians to convert the heavy transport into a mobile exercise machine and long-term prison for the dwarves.

The cells for the dwarf captives became even smaller, leaving them with much less space to sleep, exercise and do anything else for that matter. By now, Ves pretty much wrote them off as humans, so he no longer concerned himself about treating them in a humane manner.

"Ketis! They still haven't learned how to use the toilet!"

"I'm doing the best I can! The trouble is these dwarves are so used to doing their business anywhere they please that they don't see the point of toilets!"

No matter how much Ketis whipped and tormented the captive dwarves, they were so dim-witted that they could only ever learn simple patterns of behavior.

Obviously, they still had a few hundred-thousand years to go before their intelligence evolved to a level where they became as smart as humans.

The dreaded mobile mental resilience training facility came into being in this fashion. Officially, the records referred to it as the MMRTF, but a nickname the mech pilots came up with themselves displaced this unwieldy acronym.

Every mech pilot that underwent a 'training session' referred to the mobile facility as the Mind Blender. Because every mech pilot that underwent a training session left with scrambled minds.

Ves trained a number of technicians to operate the training facility without his supervision. He locked down most of the settings and programmed a number of emergency shutdown procedures should any of the parameters exceed their safety margins.

A doctor also took residence in the training facility who supervised the health of the mech pilots while the dwarves did their best to grind down their minds. Ves mainly included a doctor to reassure the mech pilots that the training wouldn't go far enough to inflict any serious harm, but for some reason the mech pilots still hated the Mind Blender.

No matter. Captain Byrd set up a rotating schedule which forced every mech pilot to undergo training at least once.

In order to preserve some of their combat effectiveness, the standard training sessions ran for only five minutes or less. While this tired out the mech pilots going through the sessions, it still left them functional enough to return to their duties. They also regained their peak condition a lot faster than if they went through a more grueling training session.

The Swordmaidens surprised him though. Although the Swordmaiden mech pilots heard plenty of horror stories about the Mind Blender from their Vandal counterparts, very rarely did any of them succumb to the strain after undergoing the full ten-minute workout.

Each Swordmaiden mech pilot forced themselves to endure the junk data sent out by the minds of the dwarf captives. Perhaps their contempt for the dwarves had given them strength, because each of them insisted on taking the full ten-minute workout instead of the truncated five-minute session tailored to the Vandals.

The only Swordmaiden mech pilots who failed to last the entire ten minutes before the doctor forcibly shut down the session were let down by their genetic aptitudes. Those with a genetic aptitude in the D-grade piloted the cheap, low-quality frontline mechs for the Swordmaidens.

Though they possessed the grit, their minds possessed a much lower tolerance against an excess of data transmissions.

Watching over the training sessions and witnessing the differences between different levels of willpower and genetic aptitude deepened his understanding of how these two traits played an important role in controlling a mech.

Through his earlier experimentation, he also learned a lot of fragmentary knowledge about neural interfaces. Even without access to theory, he managed to enrich his understanding in this field.

"It's surprising how much willpower and mental discipline can make a difference." Ves remarked as he stood behind the technicians conducting the experiments.

"Heh." Ketis smirked. "Us Swordmaidens aren't just for show, you know. Our mech pilots are the best of the best. One in ten potentates that we pick up from the frontier make it through graduation. Many of our trainees gave up along the way, while some of them died during their graduation ceremony. This insures that we can all depend on the mech pilots that are left."

Ves frowned at that. "That sounds really wasteful."

"Not really. Whenever we need new trainees, we just visit a settlement and pick up a bunch of young girls. We don't pay them anything and it doesn't take much to feed and clothe them. Besides, I've heard that true elites go through even harsher training where only one out of a hundred survives."

It wasn't actually hard to train a fully-fledged mech pilot, though it always took a lot of time. The greater challenge was to draw out their potential and extract the maximum amount of benefit out of their abilities.

Right now, the two cockpits each contained a Swordmaiden and Vandal mech pilot. They both started the training session at the same time, but the Vandal succumbed just three minutes in while the Swordmaiden clenched her teeth and made it all the way to ten minutes without becoming incapacitated.

Just like Ves trained some technicians to take over operations, Ketis trained the security officers assigned to guard the dwarf captives into keeping them on their toes.

There was an art to keeping the dwarves riled up. Treat them too gently, and they quickly became docile. Treat them too harshly, and they broke to the point where they had given up on their lives.

Perhaps a lot of human rights advocates would be horrified to see the security officers beating up the dwarves on a regular basis or disturb their sleep at irregular moments. Fortunately, the few of those types among the Vandals had no say in the matter.

Dr. Tillman and some of the other exobiologists regularly visited the dwarves to study their physiques and brain structure in order to understand them better. They even injected the dwarves with various substances, treating them as their guinea pigs which they could poke and prod however they wanted.

Right now, the training sessions hadn't produced any improvements as of yet, but Ves expected that to change as time went on. Just like any exercise, it took repeated attempts to notice a difference.

The Vandal mech pilots already stopped most of their whining. Ves deliberately scheduled the training session so that the Vandals undertook the training at the same time as the Swordmaidens.

When a Vandal mech pilot barely made it through a five-minute training session and watched on as a Swordmaiden lasted for ten entire minutes pretty much affected their self-esteem.

"I can't believe these women are stronger than us! They're pirates! How can they beat us in this area!?"

The lackluster performance of the Vandals when compared to the Swordmaidens shamed them all!

Certainly, the Vandals possessed the edge in terms of mech quality, funding, support services, supplies and more. Yet their training emphasized coordination and formation combat, while the Swordmaidens each focused on their individual prowess.

To Ves, the Swordmaidens were warriors, while the Vandals were soldiers. The two forces pursued different forms of strength.

The Swordmaiden methods adopted the customs of the frontier which highly emphasized individual combat prowess. Each Swordmaiden dreamed of becoming a mech champion like Lieutenant Dise. However, coordination became something of a challenge to these warriors. Once they let loose, even Commander Lydia found it difficult to pull them back.

It was different for the Vandals. One or two mechs may not be more skilled than their Swordmaiden counterparts, but the equation changed when they formed in larger numbers. Their versatility, coordination and initiative gave

them a distinct superiority over less coordinated forces. Their clever use of formation and sophisticated tactics allowed them to win against many different opponents.

Ves wondered if it was possible to unify the training methods of the Swordmaidens and the Vandals and form a set of best practices that led to an even stronger mech force.

"Perhaps this is the kind of training regime that produces elites among mech pilots."

Ever since he developed the mental resilience training program, he began to contemplate on how to design a mech pilot. Because that was what a training regime essentially tried to accomplish.

"It's always senior mech pilots who compose these training regimes."

And for good reason. Mech pilots respected other mech pilots, and only those who underwent the same struggles and survived many battles knew best what skills the new recruits had to master to survive the battles to come.

Having freed himself from most responsibilities by delegating them to others, Ves mostly spent his time on supervising the ongoing repair efforts. He only visited the Mind Blender to check up on the progress of the mech pilots and to gain some inspiration for his future direction.

Ves visited the dwarf prison on a whim. Due to the lack of space aboard the heavy transport and their need for more captives to keep the training sessions running, each dwarf only had enough room to lie down on their cots.

When Ves looked through the one-way porthole, the dwarf inside was shivering in the cold as the security officers deliberately plunged the temperature in order to foster its anger.

Dr. Tillman arrived a minute later. "Ah, Mr. Larkinson, I'm surprised to see you here."

"Why would you be? I can imagine that lots of people want to see these dwarves."

She shook her head. "You don't know what is going on their minds. These variant humans are repelling in almost every way imaginable. Looking at them causes them to fear that they might one day turn into something just like them if they lose their freedom. They are the cursed people, after all."

"I don't see that when I look at the dwarves." Ves snorted. "I see them as threats. What do you think the CFA will do to them when they finally come here and find out their special abilities?"

"You think they'll continue to breed the dwarves in order to employ them against mechs?"

"That might very well happen. At the very least, they'll attempt to figure out the mechanics behind this ability to they can bestow them on their own people."

Even though the CFA and MTA split their responsibilities and safeguarded separate spheres of human space, the two still fought over what direction humanity had to take in the future.

"I wouldn't be so afraid of that, Ves." The exobiologist assured him. "Our studies into the brain structure of the dwarves have shown us that they have incorporated a minute amount of intermediary matter, of the same kind as the murky crystals found in the head of a wild god. Through a process of elimination, we found that there is no other part of their bodies can that effect a remote connection besides this intermediary matter. As far as we know, only the unique circumstances of this planet allows the natives to accumulate this matter."

In other words, once the Starlight Megalodon stopped spewing higher-dimensional particles everywhere, everything that made this planet special would cease to develop.

Ves hadn't thought that far yet. He realized their intervention may cause Aeon Corona VII to undergo drastic changes, destroying the existing order. If the Starlight Megalodon truly stopped releasing the astral winds, then there would be no more beast riders, no more wild gods, no more sacred gods and no more isolation from the rest of the galaxy.

Would the natives regard this change as deliverance or punishment?

Chapter 813 Schism in Samar

As the training sessions started to pick up steam, the Vandals and the Swordmaidens also made good progress in repairing their damaged mechs. Overall, it would take another week or two to undo most of the damage from the orbital bombardment.

Unfortunately, the ancient city of Samar hadn't made much progress in recovering from the damage. Many inhabitants died due to their injuries, and the entire population split up over what the rain of meteorites from the skies actually represented.

Was it a punishment from some kind of supreme god that outranked the sacred gods?

Was it an attack from the foreigners?

Was it a sign that the world might be falling apart soon?

The Vandals finally developed a robust spying drone the size of a sparrow that could continue to stay in touch with nearby scouting mechs as long as they didn't fly too close to one of the sacred gods. This allowed them to monitor the periphery of the city.

Hysteria and division ran rife. These arguments even extended towards the sacred gods who ruled over Samar.

Unlike Mulak that was under the control of an overwhelmingly strong leader, control for Samar was split between two different alphas. They were in fact a pair of brothers who suddenly inherited the reign over the city from their father beast known as Paraixis, the Great Father and the Oldest Ancestor.

Paraixis used to be the dominant sacred god who was rumored to have been more than seven-hundred years old. More importantly than his age, all the stories about him pointed out that he embedded up to twenty-four god crystals in his hide!

The power of this great father expressed itself in control over metals. His ability to lift up sharpened spikes the length of a building and fling them to his opponents became its characteristic attack.

Another favored way Paraixis displayed his power was to lift up a heavy block of metal that used to come from a broken metallic structure and pound it against an opponent!

This powerful ability made Paraixis into the undisputed king of Samar and its surrounding territory. The abundant technological remnants gave the beast plenty of shiny toys to throw or pound at his opponents.

The creature's love for shiny metallic objects likely fostered a worship of these objects among the blessed people that lived in the city.

Everything was fine and dandy in Samar until the Great Father died.

The Great Father mated with many sacred gods and even wild gods whenever he found them in the wild. Many of his godling offspring amounted to nothing, but the Great Father saw promise in two of them for some reason and brought them under his wing, embedding with as much god crystals their young bodies could bear.

The oldest son Pailanon inherited the Great Father's telekinesis power over metal and his greenish-purple coloring. If the sacred gods of Samar had a crown prince, then Pailanon was certainly the favored candidate.

As the leader of the conservative faction, Pailanon adopted many of the traits of his father. He concerned himself with breeding capable offspring, and ignored many of the other responsibilities related to ruling over a pantheon and city.

Pairixan, the younger brother, failed to inherit his Great Father's powers. Instead, his own power mutated into manipulating the earth. He was able to effect mass destruction by summoning earthquakes, conjuring up walls of earth, lifting up heavy boulders and throwing them towards his opponents with far greater force and speed.

Though Pairixan's earth manipulation worked a lot slower than Pailanon's metal telekinesis, it was capable of devastating the entire ancient city.

Since his powers were so destructive, Pairixan believed he deserved to inherit the Great Father's mantle as the king of the gods and become the new Eldest Ancestor of Samar. While Pailanon only embedded twenty-one god crystals in his hide, Pairixan had surpassed his older brother and managed to embed twenty-two god crystals!

This alone gave him the confidence to claim the throne!

His strong and irresistible powers also inflated Pairixan's ambitions. He wasn't content with ruling over a single ancient city. He wanted to expand his territory by conquering the neighboring cities in order to become the greatest sacred god the people have ever known!

For over fifty years, the sacred gods and the blessed people of Samar split up between the Western Samar Pantheon and the Eastern Samar Pantheon.

Those who lived on the west side of the city worshipped Pailanon, the eldest son and the so-called legitimate heir to the Great Father.

Those who lived on the east side of the city worshipped Pairixan, the younger son and the strongest sacred god in Samar.

The schism between the pantheons led to a cold war between the brothers that persisted for half a century.

Despite their belief that they should be crowned as the Greatest Ancestor, neither Pailanon or Pairixan wanted to come to blows.

Pailanon feared that any duel between the two brothers would turn the ancient city and the entire surroundings into ruins. Due to his dependence on metal, he was at his strongest when he fought in the vicinity of the city.

The older brother held too little confidence to win against his ambitious sibling in the wild where he could only bring a limited amount of metal as his weapons.

As for the younger brother Pairixan, his powers lent much more to siege warfare and large-scale combat. His earth manipulation powers possessed an amazing reach and a considerable amount of might, but they weren't ideal for duels because they worked too slow!

Pailanon would have been able to fling more than a dozen giant alloy spears at the earth god before he finished summoning an earth wall to block the projectiles!

This led to an inexplicable stalemate where both sons claimed the throne but neither dared to enforce their claims. This led to a strange development in Samar's long history where two pantheons ruled the city side-by-side without any open conflict.

The apocalypse that happened more than a week ago exacerbated their differences. Each side ascribed different meanings to the disaster!

Pailanon believed that the orbital bombardment was a sign of the Great Father's disaffection. The natives believed that sacred gods couldn't die. They would just abandon their mortal shells and return to the vault of the gods and watch over the mortals scurrying about from the surface.

So when artificial meteorites dropped from the vault of the gods, pretty much everyone believed it was a sign from a greater authority.

Of course, the Eastern Samar Pantheon led by the younger son advocated that the orbital bombardment was an attack from supreme god worshipped by the foreigners and the cities that backed them. Against these outsiders, the sacred gods of Samar shouldn't be complacent. Instead, they should attack!

When Ves heard about all of the political complexities surrounding the divided city of Samar, he found it to be extraordinarily silly.

"If Pairixan is such a warmonger, why doesn't he conquer another city and rule from there?"

"Any sacred god that leaves their city won't be able to bring along their worshippers." Chief Dakkon replied as he watched over an experiment involving their only god crystal in one of the labs. "That's at least hundred-thousand blessed people you're talking about. Without an antigrav field that's large enough to shield them all, they wouldn't be able to make it out of the city limits without getting crushed. All of the blessed people except for their beast riders never think about leaving their cities since they were born, because they believe they'll die from a curse."

Ves grimaced. More superstition was at work. "Do the sacred gods even need the worship?"

"I don't know. None of us think the sacred gods derive any benefit from the worship except for stroking their egos. I think it's part of their animal instinct that drives them to be alphas. They can't stand being ignored."

"What does Dr. Tillman say about the god species?"

"Without a sacred god in our possession, she can only extrapolate from the studies of the wild god corpse. She doesn't really know if they start off sentient or not, or if it is something acquired from their beast riders. It may be that the sacred gods inherit the same thoughts and dreams as their beast riders."

That would be an interesting interaction. The if the beast rider of Pairixan was a megalomaniac who held wild ambitions, he may have contaminated Pairixan's desires, causing the beast to be so aggressive!

"So what did our spies find out about their deliberations."

"It's the same as always. The two brothers and their beast riders are both trying to convince the other of their viewpoint for a while now. The problem for us is that we'd rather prefer to get out of here before the argument boils over, but we can't due to our damaged mechs."

Ves knew more than anyone else how troublesome it was to repair the mechs. The ground forces really didn't have the transportation capacity to spare to carry away their damaged and immobilized mechs.

While it was possible for mechs to lift up other mechs and carry them elsewhere during an emergency, it always made things worse even during standard gravity.

Some of the Vandals didn't think it would be a bad idea to stand their ground, though. Defeating the sacred gods allowed them to plunder their god crystals and other goods without any scruples. Killing or capturing one of them would enable the exobiologists to study their mystical bodies, learning more about these beasts and pinpoint their weaknesses.

When Ves thought about the frightening lightning powers of Hokaz, he considered it foolish to force a confrontation with the sacred gods.

Nonetheless, the Vandals and the Swordmaidens started to gear up for war. Ever since they collected some intelligence on the powers of the sacred gods, the Vandals started cooking up some preparations.

Whether they faced Pairixan alone or with his older brother in tow, it was clear that the Flagrant Swordmaidens needed to take out the earth manipulator instantly!

As long as he came close enough, he'd be able to wreck the entire camp with earthquakes, demolishing anything in the affected area!

"I've even heard of talk of trying to assassinate Pairixan's beast rider." Dakkon mentioned after he tweaked the ongoing experiment. "They think that the big beast won't be as powerful without a human intelligence guiding its actions."

"It won't work." Ves shook his head. "Didn't we already figure out that most of the power that comes from the man-beast connection is from the beast? As an exobeast with a power that is likely as destructive as that of an ace mech, it has always possessed this might. The beast rider is much less important and doesn't even need to be the equivalent of an expert pilot."

This was the advantage of a living beast. It possessed its own intelligence and could call upon its powers by themselves. The wild gods already proved they could summon their powers without a rider, so why would a sacred god be any different?

That said, the blessed people all believed that pairing the sacred gods with their chosen enabled them to wield their powers in greater and more sophisticated ways.

"I think right now that some of us are planning to pin the death of Pairixan's beast rider to the other faction. We don't know if the inhabitants of Samar will

buy into it, though. If they have at least some brains, then they'll know that an internal division will only benefit us instead of them. We also don't know how Pairixan will lash out. He might vent his anger on the entire city.

If something like that happened, the estimated 200,000 inhabitants of Samar would all be devastated due to the actions of a third party.

Worse yet, Pairixan might turn his anger on the Flagrant Swordmaidens next!

Ves snorted. "Yeah, I don't think that's a good idea."

"I agree. We're strong enough to beat the sacred gods in a straight battle."

Chapter 814 Pairixan's War

In the end, the eastern side of the city of Samar prepared to go on the warpath!

Pairixan became tired of trying to convince his older brother Pailanon to join him in his attack aimed at the strangers. The aggressive sacred god fully believed the Flagrant Swordmaidens sent down the bombardment from the skies, and most of his worshippers bought into his claims!

The Western Samar Pantheon stubbornly refused to join Pairixan's crusade. Pailanon remained so opposed of moving to attack that Pairixan decided to launch the attack with just himself and five of his subordinate sacred gods.

That meant that six sacred gods in total planned to move out to attack the Flagrant Swordmaidens!

"What are the odds that Pailanon will change his mind? That metal-controlling beast may be able to crumple our mechs or fling them around if it gets close."

"The good news is that Pailanon is unlikely to join his younger brother if he gets into trouble, ma'am." A Vandal analyst reported in an emergency meeting. The Eastern Samar Pantheon planned to move out within hours, which left the Vandals and the Swordmaidens with little time to make their

final preparations. "The older brother will effectively be able to take control over Samar if Pairixan fails in his attack."

"What if Pairixan wins?"

"We've heard that Pailanon doesn't have a low opinion of us and our mechs. He likely believes that Pairixan will have a tough fight on his hands regardless if he wins or loses. If Pairixan loses too much strength, it's not out of the question that Pailanon will immediately push for a final confrontation between the brothers."

Ves had the misconception that the power struggle in Samar resembled the power struggles that always took place in monarchical states. Even the sacred gods had learned how to scheme against each other like humans.

During the emergency meeting, every important person gave a final heads-up for everyone. Chief Dakkon in particular suspended his experiments on the god crystal and murky crystal in order to fabricate simple but powerful auxiliary weapons.

Against the might of Pairixan and the Eastern Samar Pantheon, they could never be too underprepared!

"Has the fleet in orbit sent any support?" A mech officer asked.

"We've been shipping down additional Akkara heavy mechs as the opportunity arises. Now that the Starlight Megalodon wiped out those pirate and gang ships from the Caged and the Red Tongs, our fleet gained a lot more room to maneuver in orbit. We've also received shipments of modified shells for ballistic cannons."

"Good!"

The ground forces hadn't brought much ammunition for the ballistic cannons of the Akkara mechs because the gravity heavily reduced their range.

However, if the sacred beasts ever came close enough, the range reduction wouldn't matter.

The fleet also supplied them with a limited amount of long-ranged shells for the opening salvos. The only reason why the Akkara mechs hadn't received any more of these special shells was because it cost at least five-hundred times more to fabricate these special shells! A full ammunition load for each Akkara mech would rapidly deplete the fleet of several critical exotics and rare materials.

In fact, some of the logistics officers argued against the use of these special shells against an unsophisticated opponent like the sacred gods. It would have been much more efficient to save them for the confrontation against the other mech forces on the planet.

Not only did the Flagrant Swordmaidens had to deal with the stranded ground forces of the Caged and the Red Tongs, the Vesians had also landed their own considerable landbound mechs!

"What results are we aiming for? Are we shooting to kill or do we want to take prisoners?"

Everyone look at each other in uncertainty before they turned their gazes at Captain Byrd.

"We play it safe. While securing a sacred god or two alive is useful to us, we can't afford to lose more mechs than we ought to. Do your best to kill them all, because their destructive prowess are unconstrained so long as they still draw breath."

"Heh, once they're all dead, we can plunder their god crystals." Chief Dakkon said. "I wonder if their god crystals are any different from the one we traded from Mulak."

With that, everyone dispersed and took up their stations. According to the spy drones, Pairixan and his beast rider tried to rile up his subordinates. The ambitious younger brother intended to launch his attack with the rabid support of all the inhabitants of the entire eastern half of the city!

Ves wondered what kind of point that served. Did the sacred gods really derive their power from worship? It sounded ridiculous, but the blessed people weren't baseline humans.

He started to think about the inexplicable ability of the blessed and cursed people that enabled them to interface with a god beast. Ves and Dr. Tillman had spent some time ago into investigating how they managed to do so.

Further studies into the ability of the captive dwarf to barge into the man-machine connection of a mech showed that the different branches of humanity on this planet somehow depended on the unique circumstances of this planet to exert their remote connection powers!

Up to now, Ves and the others only thought these mind powers only applied to riding beast. Yet what if that wasn't the entire story? What if the mind powers of a large number of average natives somehow empowered these sacred gods?

Was this the reason they insisted on being worshipped?

No matter the truth, the duels against Naevudis and Hokaz already provided the Flagrant Swordmaidens with a baseline of what to expect. Even if the sacred gods of Samar appeared to be more formidable, at least they knew what to expect!

The entire camp geared up for war. They stowed away or packed up most of what they could easily move and put them onto the heavy transports that beat a slow retreat. Mech technicians provided final tune-ups to the mechs while a

couple of Vandals with gunnery training began to operate the battery of brand-new artillery cannons installed in the camp.

Ves and Ketis stared at the large cannons. They were of a simple design and fired relatively slow shells over an unimaginable distance. In truth, the caliber of the artillery cannons exceeded the maximum limits allowed by the MTA and CFA as no mech could realistically wield them in battle, but no one cared about adhering to those rules out here in the Aeon Corona System.

What mattered was that they had some big guns backing them up!

"The range of those cannons are very considerable." Ves explained. "Under standard gravity, they can fire powerful shells that can comfortably arc over the horizon. Best of all, they're mechanically simple and extremely generous in terms of material demands. Cannons like these used to be employed all the time during the Age of Conquest when warships in orbit didn't bother to bombard the crap out of the surface. I don't know why those forces bothered. Shelling an entire city for an hour with these cannons flattened it entirely."

Now, the Vandals intended to brought their city-destroying potential to bear on the aggressive sacred gods.

Ketis looked very impressed at the sheer size of the artillery cannons. "It makes you wonder what it would be like if we still used these weapons."

"We'd be much worse off. Nowadays, a battle fought over a city will only wipe out half the city and inhabitants instead of all of them. The introduction of mechs have done much to limit the collateral damage that results from war."

Not to say that mechs weren't exempt from inflicting collateral damage, but it beat the old modes of war where shelling from both sides usually ruined a city entirely during the fighting.

What was the point of conquering a city if the winner only took control of some flattened ruins at the end?

This was also why Ketis and a lot of Vandals and Swordmaidens looked at the artillery cannons with awe. There was something humbling about witnessing a battery of cannons that exceeded the size and length of heavy mech.

While they lacked in precision and versatility, they were very good at what they did. The artillery cannons could pump out much more damage at longer ranges than even the Akkara mechs.

However, the material cost of an Akkara mech exceeded at least 300 million credits while the material cost of an artillery cannon shouldn't be much more than 5 million credits!

Heavy mechs faced many mobility concerns. They needed to be powerful enough to unleash a considerable amount of firepower but be light enough to move. The only way to square this circle was to employ expensive exotic alloys that were both strong and fairly light.

The artillery cannons held no such concerns. They weren't designed to move at all, so their design focused completely on launching as much firepower in the distance as possible.

An alert sounded out in the camp.

"It's time." Ves said and guided Ketis towards the bunker.

As mech designers, they played no role in the battle. They only became relevant before or after a battle. The only times when they remained relevant during a battle was if it stretched out in a multi-day campaign.

No one expected this battle to drag on. According to the movement speeds of the average god species, the Flagrant Swordmaidens needed to solve the sacred gods within thirty to safeguard the camp!

Ves and Ketis watched on as the officers and operators in the bunker's command center coordinated their action.

"The eastern gate is opening!"

"Pairixan is leading out his pantheon of subordinate gods! He is bringing out only four sacred gods!"

"Where is the missing sacred god?! Is it flanking us?" Captain Byrd asked.

"Our overhead spy drones have spotted the sixth sacred god, ma'am! It's standing guard beside Pairixan's palace!"

The mood among the Vandals lightened up a bit. Pairixan didn't feel reassured with leaving the eastern half of the city unguarded. Perhaps Pailanon would have made a move to take control over Pairixan's territory of all of its guardians left!

Still, the sacred god left behind was the smallest, youngest and weakest of the Eastern Pantheon. The ones with the greatest battle efficiencies followed Pairixan out of the city gates.

Both the sacred gods and their beast riders gazed in the direction of the Flagrant Swordmaidens with hungry expressions. Pairixan even released a majestic roar that fired up his subordinates.

"Our cannons and artillery mechs have received their targeting coordinates! They can fire their cannons at any moment!"

"Our laser rifleman mechs are standing by at their designated positions. All of them have clear firing lines of the enemy beasts and are maintaining a constant distance."

Both the Vandals and the Swordmaidens lived and breathed war. They inherited a long line of military tradition and advancement that stretched for multiple Ages spanning tens of thousands of years!

The human race had always engaged in war in one form or another!

Compared to the natives who had forgotten pretty much every modern war tradition, their offensive fell short by so many points that even Ves felt embarrassed by their naivety.

"Pairixan's force hasn't sent out any scouts."

"The sacred beasts are grouped up tightly with Pairixan in the lead."

"The enemy force has yet to show any awareness that they are being observed."

However, even though the enemy consisted of just five god beasts, each of them possessed the potential destructiveness of an expert mech. As for Pairixan himself, his powers of the earth could instantly wipe out all of the ground forces if he fully let loose!

The overarching priority of the Flagrant Vandals was to take out this living engine of destruction at the very start! The longer he lived, the higher the chance he'd call down an earthquake. No one wanted to find out how much power Pairixan really held!

"Wait until the enemy gods are at least two kilometers from the city walls. We don't want our explosive shells to land inside the city by mistake. That might provoke Pailanon and the Western Samar Pantheon into action."

Though it rankled a bit for the Flagrant Swordmaidens to give the enemy time to trudge closer, they really couldn't afford to drag the metal-controlling sacred god into the battle.

Pairixan may have the edge in terms of widespread destruction, but Pailanon power of metal turned him into one of a nightmare for any mech force arrayed against him! No one truly knew how far the range of his powers extended!

"The enemy force has reached two kilometers away from the city walls!"

"Commence the plan. Artillery, open fire!"

Chapter 815 Qilanxo

The artillery battery boomed at the same time as the Akkara mechs fired their ballistic cannons loaded with long-ranged shells!

Multiple deep booms thrummed throughout the camp at the same time, causing the very ground to shake and deafening sounds to assault everyone's ears! If everyone hadn't already unfolded their helmets in order to protect their ears, they would have turned half-deaf already!

A short time later, the pin-point targeted artillery shells landed in the midst of the sacred gods, with multiple shells impacting directly against Pairixan's considerable bulk!

As the artillery cannons reloaded, the dust and smoke that obscured the sacred gods slowly blew away.

"Energy levels are spiking among the sacred gods! Multiple energy tornadoes are forming!"

As the effects of the initial salvo stopped blocking the vision of their long-ranged sensors, the Flagrant Swordmaidens saw to their astonishment that the sacred gods and beast riders survived the bombardment with nary a scratch!

When Captain Byrd rewinded the footage to an instant just before the artillery shells hit, a huge energy barrier extended over the tightly-grouped sacred gods!

"Qilanxo's energy barrier blocked the artillery shells!"

"Damnit, they fooled us!"

Pairixan's mate Qilanxo already activated her power the moment the sacred gods left the city! As the second god of the Eastern Samar Pantheon, she earned a very high position solely due to the fact that she excelled in defensive barriers.

Qilanxo's defensive specialisation made up for Pairixan's deficiency in this area. While he could manipulate the earth to shield himself from enemy attacks, his powers took far too long to take effect.

In contrast, Qilanxo could call up shaped barriers with just an instant of thought!

Captain Byrd placed a lot of importance on the Vandal artillery mechs and cannons. Their ability to fire at the sacred gods beyond viewing distance gave them the chance to inflict serious damage on Pairixan before the enemy put up their guard.

They had hoped to kill or inflict serious damage on the ambitious younger son of the Great Father before Qilanxo thought to active her renowned defensive barriers!

"There are limits to their protective energy fields and barriers! Artillery, proceed to coordinate your fire on Pairixan! Laser rifleman mechs, open fire! Don't let them accumulate energy in peace!"

As the sacred gods each called down energy tornados on their forms with the help of their god crystals, shells and lasers started to bombard their position with unrelenting fury! Continuous booms and impacts sounded out at both the camp and the battlefield.

The destructive firepower of the artillery mechs and cannons should have been enough to sweep away half a city, yet after four intensive salvos Qilanxo's energy barrier still held strong!

"What does it take to crack open Qilanxo's shell?!"

The beast riders sitting in their saddles on top of the beasts yelled in fury at the explosions rocking the giant energy barrier. Rather than weakening, the barrier grew stronger as the energy tornado called down by Qilanxo started to infuse her god crystal's energy resevoir with an abundance of energy.

She possessed sixteen god crystals, which was one less than Hokaz. Although Qilanxo was a lot younger than the Tyrant of the Wastes, her raw energy capacity didn't lose out too much!

Her powers and energy capacity firmly propelled the female sacred god in the ranks of ace mechs!

Ves looked over the shoulders of the sensor operators and read the energy readings of Qilanxo's energy barrier.

The level of protection it offered for a given amount of energy far surpassed the efficiency of energy screens employed by most of humanity!

Even the hundreds of laser beams that struck specific points in the energy barrier failed to penetrate its defenses!

Reading through the data, Ves quickly figured out why the energy barrier remained so impervious. "Qilanxo's barriers aren't purely based on converting energy into a barrier that can block damage. They're manipulating space!"

The intelligence gathered by the spy drones failed to ferret out this important detail! This was the problem of relying on hearsay from the local city dwellers. Their own ignorance and lack of understanding towards the powers of the god had misled the Vandal analysts!

In any case, an energy barrier based on energy differed remarkably from a barrier formed out of solidified space!

Captain Byrd gritted her teeth. "Stick to the plan. Maintain a coordinated rate of fire and keep up the pressure! I don't believe Qilanxo can maintain her energy barrier forever!"

Nonetheless, after being struck by ten more artillery salvos and thousands of laser beams, the energy barrier held strong!

During this time, the sacred gods all supplemented their god crystals with the help of the energy tornados. None of the shelling and laser bombardment managed to halt their charging process.

The sacred gods and their beast riders roared their defiance at the attackers in the distance as they continued to proceed forward!

After they slowly crawled three kilometers forward, Pairixan abruptly halted. The beast roared towards the ground as his god crystals glowed a little brighter.

Suddenly, a vast stretch of ground before him began to explode as the soil beneath started to shift under his influence.

"All of our mines in the vicinity prematurely detonated or got crushed by abnormal soil movements!"

"Damn, this exobeast is a sharp one! He's able to detect our mines underneath the soil."

The raft of explosions from the extensive minefield covertly placed beforehand threw the entire terrain into a crater-filled wasteland! The Vandals dug huge amounts of ordnance underneath the soil. Even if the sacred gods wouldn't sustain significant damage from the explosions, at least it should have slowed them down by destabilizing their footing.

However, Pairixan showed his control over the earth by forcibly exerting his efforts towards the ground, flattening out the uneven terrain and hardening its surface so that it could bear the sacred gods within causing their limbs to sink.

It barely took two minutes to straighten out a couple of square kilometers of affected terrain!

The five sacred gods continued to hunker forward under the omnipotent protection of Qilanxo's energy barrier, though it would be more apt to call it a

space barrier! However you called it, the space barrier completely negated the advantages the Vandals placed their hopes upon.

No matter how much firepower they rained down at the space barrier, Qilanxo looked as if she could keep it up for hours!

This was more than enough time for Pairixan to come within viewing distance of the camp, upon which he'd be able to devastate it with an earthquake or some other god-like feat of earth manipulation!

All the plans the Flagrant Swordmaidens came up with basically consisted of shelling the hell out of the huge but slow-moving sacred gods. They made allowances for their energy fields, but they never expected Qilanxoto be so abnormally strong, to the point of shouldering enough firepower to wipe out half of Samar or more.

They really shouldn't have underestimated any of the sacred gods!

However, the Vandals didn't believe that the space barrier could shield the sacred gods forever. Any form of defense possessed a flaw! Right now, the Vandals continued their shelling but varied their ordnance a bit in order to explore what it took to crack or circumvent this defense.

"Load incendiary shells and fire a salvo!"

This finally produced a different result. When the shells hit and released gouts of propellants on fire, the sacred gods started to get spooked. They weren't used to being surrounded by fire from all sides!

The flames and smoke obscured their own vision, causing them to lose direction and be unable to figure out what to do for a moment!

"How much incendiary shells do we have?"

"Only enough for three more salvos, ma'am!"

"Tell the artillery cannons to save them up. Only load them into the cannons when given the order!"

The incendiary shells and the fire burning over the space barrier and in the surrounding terrain spooked caused a lot of difficulties. In particular, all of the burning and smoke choked out the beast riders riding atop the sacred gods.

As blessed people who have inherited their optimized genes from former CFA officers, they possessed a considerable capacity to hold their breaths. However, they still faced difficulties if their lungs stopped for a couple of minutes straight.

Their brains still needed oxygen to function!

A tactical officer offered a suggestion. "Captain, Qilanxo's energy barrier isn't able to seal up their entire surroundings. It's still leaving out a gap for air to circulate. If we launch our poison shells, we can incapacitate the beast riders."

Dr. Tillman studied the physiques of the blessed and cursed people extensively. While both possessed a considerable natural resistance against poison, the blessed people enjoyed much weaker protection, only able to rely on their optimized baseline human genes.

The dwarves were considerably more resilient in that regard. Up to now, the exobiologists still hadn't been able to formulate a sedative that could knock a dwarf unconscious without killing him right afterwards.

Several minutes went by as the sacred gods managed to move out of the firestorm with difficulty. Flames still burned above the space barrier, but the propellant almost ran their course.

"Alright. Load in three poison shells and fire them at these coordinates. Let the wind waft underneath the space barrier and take effect."

The space barrier blocked all physical damage and most forms of energy attacks, so detonating the poison shells above it would see most of the active elements blown away.

So instead, the Vandals proceeded to fire the poison shells a short distance away and let them release their invisible and odorless gas into the surrounding terrain.

The wind quickly blew them into the middle of the sacred gods. Due to the miniscule size of the poisonous particles, the individual energy fields that empowered the scales of the sacred gods and covered the position of the beast riders had no effect!

The protection offered by the energy field mainly defended against threats that could be seen with the naked eye. Against this invisible and insidious form of attack, neither the sacred gods nor the beast riders suspected anything amiss in the limited air.

"The beast riders are being affected by the poison gas."

Blurry footage from their long-ranged sensors detected abnormal behavior from the beast riders. With the concentration of gas blowing through their positions, the chosen of the gods should have been knocked unconscious by now.

However, while the blessed people atop the sacred gods swayed in their saddles, they somehow managed to stay conscious.

The beast riders of Pairixan and Qilanxo were least affected of all!

"The poison gas achieved limited results! The beast riders are withstanding the effects of the gas!"

"Fire the remaining nine poison shells immediately!"

A short time later, the concentration of poison increased to a level that wouldn't have knocked a human unconscious, but outright kill them if they casually inhaled the air!

Yet the beast riders remained conscious and breathing even if they encountered difficulties. The sacred gods all roared in anger, with some of them even starting to blow at the air in order to disperse the foul air.

"How are the beast riders still alive?! We threw enough poison in there to kill a thousand humans!"

None of the doctors and exobiologists on staff knew the answer. They all shook their heads or peered at the footage in an attempt to solve the puzzle. So far, none of them held any luck!

Ves frowned deeply at the resilience shown by the beast riders. Battles between sacred gods was fraught with danger, so it didn't surprise him that the beast riders enjoyed additional protection.

However, this abnormal resistance against poison went beyond everyone's expectation!

What was so special about the connection between the sacred gods and their chosen? Why did it surpass the capabilities of the connection between mechs and their mech pilots?

While everyone came up with their own guesses, Ves believed the key to their heightened performance lay in their man-beast connection!

Chapter 816 Inexorable

Having exhausted half of their bags of tricks, the Vandals began to grow concerned about their ongoing battle against Pairixan and his coterie of god beasts.

The sacred gods hostile to the Flagrant Swordmaidens continued to crawl their way forward under continuous and intense shelling. Their artillery

cannons and artillery mechs already expended half of their ammunition, and would soon run out if they kept up their frantic rate of fire.

The laser rifleman mechs poking Qilanxo's incredibly strong space barrier started to build up a large amount of heat. Their energy reserves emptied out at an alarming pace as they continued to fire their hot barrels while maintaining a constant distance. Their heavy gravity backpacks also groaned under the extensive amount of time they remained active.

What the Flagrant Swordmaidens needed was some way to break through the space barrier shielding the entire attacking force from attacks fired from afar.

The Vandals and Swordmaidens each unfolded gimmick after gimmick, but nothing seemed to faze Pairixan and his subordinates.

They tried to blast their ears and deafen the beast riders by launching incredibly loud noise generators near their positions. Pairixan caused the entire terrain to submerge the noise grenades and stifle them beneath layers of soil.

They tried to displace the oxygen in the air by launching subsequent waves of incendiary shells. The beast riders managed to hold their breath for up to ten minutes until the sacred gods took care of the fires.

The exobiologists outright broke a taboo and quickly synthesized a lethal airborne poison so deadly that it might wipe out a quarter of the population of Samar if released into the city!

Yet deploying such a highly concentrated poison didn't appear to affect the beast riders in any substantial way.

It was as if they were just as tough as the incredible sacred gods they rode upon!

Each time the Flagrant Swordmaidens failed to take out the sacred gods or their chosen, the attackers became more determined that they would win. Their morale soared!

As for the Flagrant Swordmaidens, while their morale hadn't plummeted to rock-bottom due to their discipline and experience, none of them held out any hope of winning an easy victory anymore.

The enemy force possessed considerably more defenses than anyone had anticipated. In their first proper clash against an organized force of sacred gods, the Flagrant Swordmaidens learned that their previous duels against Hokaz and Naeduviz weren't indicative of their actual battle performance.

Just like how a mech force grew stronger than the sum of its parts by leveraging the synergies between the different classifications of mechs, so did the Eastern Pantheon achieve greater results.

In truth, out of the four subordinate sacred gods who followed their leader, three of them outright didn't matter. They were so young and weak and their powers were so unimpressive that they were only a little stronger than a wild god.

Only Pairixan and Qilanxo mattered, as their combined defensive and offensive power was enough to wipe out the Flagrant Swordmaidens if they came into range!

Though every mech scrupulously maintained a constant distance, the same couldn't be said for the artillery cannons and the camp.

It had been a mistake to camp out so close to the ancient city of Samar!

Nothing the Flagrant Swordmaidens came up with worked. The sacred gods continued their slow but inexorable march to the camp.

Pairixan would soon come close enough to see the camp and all of its artillery cannons. Though some of the heavy salvos caused the procession of exobeasts to slow down or halt, they never incurred any actual battle damage.

Both Commander Lydia and Captain Byrd fell into a heated argument as the shelling which came predominantly from the Vandals failed to achieve any effect.

The Swordmaidens didn't fear the sacred gods! Perhaps the ranged attacks might not have achieved any effect, but melee combat was another story altogether.

If hundreds of Swordmaiden mechs stormed the sacred gods, would Qilanxo's energy field still hold up?

The two commanding officers argued whether to unleash their melee mechs or not. Captain Byrd felt very apprehensive about this course of action because they couldn't predict whether Pairixan would have the time to bury them all in a landslide or an earthquake!

"It's too risky!"

"We have already tried every other solution." Commander Lydia retorted over the comm. "Many opponents that pretend to be invincible always fall short as long as you confront them with overwhelming numbers and might. We aren't as adept in ranged combat as you, but we know how to slaughter exobeasts up close. We've been hunting all kinds of beasts for decades."

"These aren't your average exobeasts. I hate to admit it, but calling them gods isn't entirely undeserved."

Once a sacred god grew old enough and embedded enough god crystals into their hides, they became as formidable as expert mechs or ace mechs!

It took more than a hundred regular mechs to defeat a single expert mech, though the exact outcome differed widely depending on various factors. Still, this loose rule of thumb applied just as well against sacred gods!

And the Flagrant Swordmaidens weren't just facing one of them, but five of them at the same time! Even though only two out of the five really mattered, the synergy they displayed so far countered everything they threw at them without any signs of faltering!

"Qilanxo's energy reserves have halved!" Someone reported.

"That's too slow!" Captain Byrd barked. She was starting to lose her composure as the pressure of the battle got to her. "We need to intensify the damage and exhaust her energy reserves before the sacred gods get into range. That is the only way we can win this battle without sending our melee mechs into a suicidal charge against Pairixan!"

The formidable earth manipulation powers gave Pairixan an unprecedented amount of control over the surrounding terrain. Engaging it in melee gave the sacred god the perfect opportunity to devastate all of the melee mechs at once.

Some of the Vandals held out hope that Venerable Xie could reverse the battle situation. So far, the Vandals held him out in reserve, as his accuracy mattered more than the marginal amount of firepower he could contribute to the ongoing one-sided firefight.

Ves knew that the expert pilot wouldn't be able to do anything. The Pale Dancer had been designed as a skirmishing ranged mech meant to run rings around other mechs.

Not to mention that the Vandals fielded the Pale Dancer with a laser rifle instead of its ballistic rifle. Most of Venerable Xie's resonance powers became invalid as soon as his mech switched weapon types.

While the Pale Dancer and its mech pilot still retained its incredible level of accuracy, particularly while on the move, this dueling capability didn't matter against the sacred gods that relied on brute force and sheer might to overwhelm their opponents!

Ves couldn't hold himself back any longer. He stepped forward. "Captain, I have a couple of suggestions. Since every other method of incapacitating the sacred gods and their riders have failed, the only way to defeat them is to exhaust Qilanxo's energy reserves."

"We are already doing so. Quickly get to the point."

"While our shelling is inflicting a great amount of damage, it is not the greatest damage source that we have in our possession."

The captain frowned. "Are you referring to our expert mech? I'm afraid I don't believe his intervention at this time will make much of a difference."

"No, not that. Rather, I'm thinking about employing our largest power generators. What if we overload them in proximity to the sacred gods? The sheer amount of energy unleashed will rival the power of a large tactical nuclear weapon!"

"That's a war crime!"

"It's not as if we skirted some of the other taboos already." Ves shrugged nonchalantly.

"Even if we can overload our power generators, it's too late to bring them forward."

"Is it? If I recall, one of the flying transports of the fleet has recently landed to supply our artillery cannons with shells. It has more than enough cargo space to drop the power generators on top of the sacred gods!"

This time, Captain Byrd and some of the Vandals looked thoughtful. If they were willing to sacrifice their power generators by inducing them to critical levels, then the amount of damage they could do would be enough to blast an entire area with hot, explosive fury!

Since time was short, Captain Byrd didn't hesitate for long. She opened up a comm channel and filled in the chief engineer. "Let us execute Mr. Larkinson's plan! Chief Dakkon, please select the most easily movable power generators in our camp and bring them up to the flying transport with haste!"

"It will take time to enact this harebrained scheme!" The chief complained over the comm. "I can't unmoor those power generators with the snap of my fingers."

The technical challenges to keeping the power generators running with all of its safeties disengaged were considerable. The engineers and technicians needed to perform so many procedures because power generators simply weren't meant to blow up!

Even if they incurred fatal damage, it was rare for them to actually blow up and wipe out an entire base because they consisted almost entirely of safety features. The actual components responsible for generating energy out of the reactants only consisted of a relatively small portion of the construction.

In short, the Flagrant Swordmaidens needed to stall the march of the sacred gods.

"I have another suggestion." Ves spoke up. "We can slow them down by perplexing them. The sacred gods don't know we are trying to buy some time."

"And how do you suggest we do that? Come forward and try to engage them in a dialogue?"

Anyone who walked to the sacred gods would be going out on a limb. Nobody knew if the sacred gods would stop and talk, but there was a very large chance that Pairixan would grow angry and toss a boulder at the poor fellow!

Ves grinned underneath his helmet. "We don't necessarily have to send out one of our own. Remember the dwarves we imprisoned at the Mind Blender? I think the Samarrans will be very astonished to encounter a bunch of wildlings in the way. While they may kill them out of hand, they might also grow curious enough to halt their march."

"We'll follow both suggestions." Captain Byrd commanded. "Fetch the dwarves and throw them onto a fast transport. Send in a diplomat as well. Once the fast transport nears the sacred gods, drop off the dwarves and see what the sacred gods will do. If the dwarves failed to buy enough time, then release our diplomat and have him or her try to stall the enemy."

It was a haphazard plan but it was better than nothing. The main concern was that the fast transport needed to come well into visual range to drop off the dwarves anywhere near the sacred gods.

However, the Vandals had no more tricks up their sleeve. They enacted the spurious plans suggested by Ves even if many of them had misgivings about them in private.

It didn't take much time to drag the ignorant dwarves out of their cells and lock them into a cabin aboard a fast transport. The Vandals also selected an unlucky low-ranking serviceman to be their spokesperson.

The man was known for his fast talk.

As the fast transport moved out towards the threat as fast as its limbs could manage, the shelling continued. Qilanxo's space barrier continued to erode, but not fast enough to prevent Pairixan from coming close to the camp.

"Captain! Our scouts keeping an eye on the western side of Samar report that the western gate is opening! Pailanon and two of his subordinate gods are exiting the gate!"

Damn! More sacred gods!

"What are Pailanon intentions?!"

"Unknown, our spy drones haven't picked up any chatter about his motivations."

For some reason, the older brother decided to throw himself into the fray as well! Whether Pailanon intended to help Pairixan defeat the outsiders or confront his younger brother in a fateful duel, Ves couldn't tell!

Chapter 817 Buying Time

The Vandals tried to come up with some other plan besides the latest harebrained scheme that came out of Ves. Now that he suggested something like overloading the power generators to unleash an explosion so furious that the camp would definitely be affected by the shockwave and other emissions despite the distance, a dam had broken.

Several engineers and other people who ordinarily never said anything came up with several crazy ideas.

An exobiologist suggested they pool the contents of five-thousand nutrient bars and lace it with a liberal amount of toxic metals and substances sure to fatally poison even the deadliest exobeast! They'd serve the giant beast candy and hope to hell that one of them would be curious enough to eat it especially after the exobiologists incorporated juicy meaty smells to the adulterated food.

"It's worth a try. Do it." Captain Byrd waved her hand dismissively.

Though it didn't sound like the idea would work, it was better than resorting to the potentially catastrophic solution of sending all of their melee mechs into action. Sacred gods with widespread terrain manipulation powers like the

great Pairixan could potentially bury them all under the ground in an instant! That was why the Flagrant Swordmaidens were so adamant about keeping their distance!

In fact, they had long begun the process of evacuating everyone and everything that could easily be moved. However, numerous supplies and large amounts of heavy equipment that took too much time and effort to dismantle couldn't be brought away so soon, and they still had a large amount of damaged mechs that couldn't be moved at all.

The reason why they made their stand was because those damaged mechs were vitally important, because they directly translated to strength when they faced their real enemies.

The natives and the sacred gods weren't their real enemies!

The orbital bombardment by the late fleet of the Caged and the Red Tongs reminded the Flagrant Swordmaidens that their actual enemies still awaited. They must have certainly landed their landbound mech forces somewhere on this massive planet.

There was no need to seek them out, because all their paths led to the same destination. The Starlight Megalodon. The battleship that everyone thought was dormant but proved them all wrong.

The fact that the unscrupulous orbital bombardment provoked a reaction from the Starlight Megalodon hinted that those running the ship still took the CFA's mission seriously. Widespread use of weapons of mass destruction at Seven to the point of devastating an entire region might cause them to launch another antimatter torpedo at the offenders!

This was also why the Vandals felt uneasy about the suggestion of overloading a power generator. Technically, doing so deliberately in order to cause mass destruction definitely went against the rules upheld by the CFA.

Ves could only shrug at their hesitation and opposition. "I think the reason why the Starlight Megalodon moved into action was because the orbital bombardment threatened to depopulate an entire region of life. If Seven is an experimental ground as some of us have speculated, then those who are running the experiments don't want them to be ruined by an outsider. What we are doing will only devastate a small area at most and kill a bunch of sacred gods. Samar still has Pailanon and the rest of the Western Samar Pantheon to take charge."

Speaking of Pailanon, the older brother exited the western gate with two subordinate sacred gods a while ago.

"What is the status of Pailanon? Is he approaching our direction?"

"Pailanon's group has halted, ma'am." Someone who kept an eye on Pailanon through spy drones and scout mechs reported. "They are maintaining their distance."

No one knew why Pailanon exited the city and stalked in the direction of Pairixan and the Flagrant Swordmaidens.

One thing was for sure. The Flagrant Swordmaidens likely wouldn't be able to handle both the older and younger brothers at the same time!

"I think he's waiting. If Pairixan wins easily, Pailanon won't go in or even help him clean us up. If Pairixan is facing more opposition than expected, then Pailanon may help us do his younger brother in! He's being opportunistic!"

"Is there a way to draw Pailanon on our side?"

No one could come up with an answer to that besides letting a scout mech approach the volatile sacred god. However, according to past behavior and all the stories they heard so far, the metal controller might very well take control over the mech and treat it as his toy!

By now, the fast transport carrying the dwarves and 'diplomatic envoy' dropped off the dwarves somewhere close to the sacred gods before beating away as fast as its legs could carry!

Though it appeared that Pairixan wanted to stop the big shiny transport, several changes happened that caused him to pause.

The Flagrant Swordmaidens also stopped their shelling and laser discharges all of a sudden. This sudden change threw the besieged sacred gods and beast riders off-guard.

What was happening? Why did the attacks stop hammering their defenses?

Despite the temporary respite, Qilanxo studiously maintained her barrier up despite the continued drain on her energy reserves. She remained vigilant against sneak attacks like the initial opening salvo of the artillery cannons. Their opponents didn't play by the rules as their species had fought for generations!

"What are the sacred gods doing?"

"I think they're befuddled by the dwarves because they came out of one of our fast transports. They can't equate the dwarves having any relations with functional machines."

"Do you mean they think that they are mistaking us as the cursed people?"

"Who knows."

It certainly sounded weird. When the Flagrant Swordmaidens initially tried to open dialogue with the sacred gods of Samar, they only showed up in giant mechs. The outsiders never showed their human forms inside their mechs!

Ves tried to imagine what it would be like if the dwarves took the place of the Vandals and the Swordmaidens. They might be able to gain control over the mechs if they adopt the right thinking pattern, though succeeding in interfacing

with a mech didn't gain them any mastery in the fundamental skills required to pilot a mech.

Any ten-year old tested for genetic aptitude possessed the ability to interface with any mech. In theory.

However, any who did so immediately caused their mechs to trip or perform some other calamitous maneuver. It would be like a random person gaining complete control over the helm of a starship.

If the dummy mode hadn't been engaged, the ship might overload her reactor or collide into a space station because the person at the helm didn't have any clue what to do!

It took ten to fifteen years of training for most mech pilots to qualify to pilot something as complex as a mech. The dwarves, for all of their inborn abilities to interface with both mechs and exobeasts, could never make up for at least a decade of dedicated training.

The dwarves wouldn't be able to fulfill any of the support services as well. Never mind operating the machines or maintaining the mechs, they wouldn't even know how to operate the kitchen!

The absurd thought distracted Ves from the initial interaction between the dwarf captives and the sacred gods.

"It's working! The dwarves are buying time for us!"

To some of their amazement, the sacred gods and their beast riders fell into an internal discussion after the dwarves showed up out of the blow.

As for the captives, a handful of them noticed that they were free from their cells and instantly tried to make off!

The sight of the dwarves running away with their stubby legs amused the sacred gods. Pairixan applied his power over the earth and caused the area around the dwarves to be ringed with a round earthen wall.

The dwarves were too short to climb over the smooth walls!

"That's a lot of precision."

Some of the dwarves mindlessly continued their attempts at climbing over the walls, while the other ones had gone senseless at the sight of several sacred gods.

Pairixan continued to move closer, forcing the other sacred gods to move with him in order to stay under Qilanxo's umbrella.

A few minutes passed as the beasts roared with each other and their riders chiming in. Ves got the sense that they were trying to make sense of the sudden appearance of the dwarves. One of the riders even yelled something at the dwarves, though he didn't receive any response.

Suddenly, Pairixan decided he had enough. He extended his dragon-like head and snapped nine closely-grouped dwarves into his gullet!

The remaining dwarves yelled and tried to climb over the earth walls, to no avail! Pairixan dove in again and continuously chomped on the remaining dwarves with rapt pleasure.

Evidently, dwarf meat tasted good for the sacred gods!

"Well, at least the captives bought us some time."

Even a five-minute delay helped them out a lot. Chief Dakkon and the engineers rushed to unmoor the power generators while keeping them running with all of the safeties disengaged. This was exceptionally hard to do in a short amount of time because the power generators were designed to shut down as safely as possible if anything went wrong.

What the engineers essentially tried to do was to hack the power generators into doing the exact thing that all of their programming and hardware tried their best to prevent!

Checking on the progress of the engineers, Ves realized that they still needed some time.

With a heavy voice, Captain Byrd issued the next order. "Alright, send in our diplomat."

The suited Vandal who emerged from the fast transport hadn't volunteered for this duty. In fact, the man was kind of a delinquent in that he frequently got into trouble with his loose mouth and slacking ways.

The Vandals included more of their ilk than was strictly healthy. Their productively left a lot to be desired and their screw-ups often set a task back rather than progress it forward. They were more trouble than they were worth, but the Vandals had no choice but to continue to employ them to make up the numbers.

Now, the only chance this unlucky chump had to make it out alive was to fast talk his way out of getting eaten by Pairixan. If he somehow bought the Vandals enough time to finish their preparations, then he and his dependents would be heavily rewarded.

When the chump garbed in a hazard suit with an active gravitic backpack came close to the sacred gods, the man almost fell to his knees.

"Don't eat me!"

The appearance of the man caused the sacred gods to halt yet again. The dwarves had intrigued the sacred gods, but once the novelty faded, Pairixan just ate them all without any further interest.

It was different for the Vandal that showed up out of the blue. The man possessed the same stature as the blessed people, but was garbed in a technological suit that was unlike anything the Samarrans had seen before!

Due to the interference and space barrier hindering most of their observation methods, the Vandals couldn't tell what the beast riders were saying to each other. The remote connection to the diplomat's suit also increasingly turned to noise the closer the sacred gods came to the man.

"The beast rider of Pairixan is calling our diplomat forward."

With an uncertain gait, the Vandal slowly stepped forward, trying hard to keep his gaze away from the bloody maws of the Pairixan, Qilanxo and the other sacred gods.

Once he walked underneath Qilanxo's space barrier, the Vandals lost connection to the man's suit.

"Now, let's hope he can stall them long enough for us to complete our plan."

One minute passed.

Two minutes passed.

Three minutes passed.

From certain sensors, they managed to find out that the diplomat was gesturing wildly while engaging the beast riders in conversation.

Seven minutes passed before the diplomat amazingly retreated without getting chomped upon by the sacred god! The man even dragged it out by walking backwards with slow, measured steps.

By the time nine minutes had passed, the Vandals finally regained comm connection to the hazard suit of their diplomat.

"What did you talk about?" Captain Byrd immediately asked.

The Vandals only hastily gave him some instructions on what to talk about. None of them really held out any hope that it would matter, but it at least gave the diplomat something to waste more time.

"I went with the third suggestion." The man said with evident exhaustion. "I managed to convince Pairixan that we can help him kill his older brother!"

Chapter 818 Big Blas

Teaming up with Pairixan to kill Pailanon so that the aggressive sacred god gained control over the ancient city of Samar?

It sounded preposterous! Captain Byrd immediately shook her head. "Good work, now get back to the fast transport."

"Are we going to do what is promised, ma'am?"

"No." Byrd immediately replied while pressing her lips together. "We'll just give Pairixan a show, but we need to kill this overgrown lizard as soon as the power generators are ready to blow. I don't trust this fellow anymore than a Vesian. At least we know enough about Pailanon for him to ignore us as long as we don't threaten his power base."

Captain Byrd ordered a company of mechs to walk in to visual range of the sacred gods, but come no closer if they could help it. As the mechs halted within visual range but well outside of hearing range, Pairixan and the other sacred gods started to become befuddled.

The delay irritated the god and the earth started to shake.

"Pull back!"

The mechs immediately turned around and caused the surrounding earth to shake more violently! Pairixan expended a great amount of energy that completely devastated a wide area around him. The earthquake even affected the mechs, but because they stayed far enough away from the epicenter, the mechs all managed to get away in time.

With their gravitic backpacks active, they moved a lot faster and nimbler than Pairixan expected!

In fact, none of the sacred gods could explain how the outsiders managed to make the machines move so fast. Pairixan gazed at the mechs as they ran with a hungry and greedy expression.

Perhaps it wanted to find out how the mechs moved so fast!

As the mechs finally moved out of sight, leaving the sacred gods alone, Pairixan began to exert his considerable might yet against and smoothed out the terrain in front of him. A straight avenue amidst the broken soil led straight into the direction of the camp.

They resumed their march too fast!

"Where are we on the power generators?!"

"Chief Dakkon reports that he needs fifteen more minutes to bring them to the cargo hold of the flying transport, ma'am! He's prepared three separate power generators!"

Detonating three power generators at the same time should be enough to overwhelm any form of defenses if they blew up at the same time and the same place. The only problem was that if the sacred gods came any closer, the camp would fall within the destructive range!

The Vandals tried a few other tricks. For example, a fast transport deposited a giant candy bar made out of thousands of nutrient packs. Once the sacred gods came across the poisonous gift, the sacred gods looked at it with suspicion.

Despite its appealing smell, the sacred gods weren't following their instincts! In fact, the beast riders pointed at the candy bar and expressed a lot of suspicion towards this strange piece of food that came out of the blue.

Though Pairixan looked as if it grew tempted enough to take a bite, his beast rider always pulled him back at the last second.

"Pairixan's beast rider is sharp enough to know that it's a trap!"

Watching the interaction between the beast riders and the sacred gods indicated that the beasts listened to their riders. However, their instincts still reigned strong as the beasts all showed signs of succumbing to their baser needs.

However, their human partners played vital roles into adding some brains to the equation.

If not for the beast riders, the Vandals could have fooled the sacred gods!

"They're bypassing the candy bar."

"It was worth a try. At least it bought us two minutes of time."

"Resume the attack! If we can't slow them down by using tricks, we can still shell them so hard that they have no choice but to slow down!"

The artillery cannons barked, while hundreds of laser rifles unleashed their hot fury. The brief respite the Vandals bought through their tricks managed to give the cannons and lasers time to cool down while replenishing some of their ammunition or batteries. This didn't sound significant, but the pause allowed them to fire their weapons without worrying about breaking them or running out of ammunition!

The heavy bombardment slowed down the progress of the sacred gods, especially since some of them landed in their path. On the advice of a tactical officer, the heavy cannons began to deform the ground up ahead, causing Pairixan to waste valuable time and energy smoothing out the ground and reinforcing it to withstand the repeated impacts.

All of this only slowed down the sacred gods just a fraction, but that already helped them out a lot!

"The engineers have finished loading the power generators in the transport!"

"Lift off immediately!"

Engineers continued to babysit the power generators as they became increasingly less stable inside the flying transport.

If nothing happened, they would eventually melt down or blow up, causing the entire camp to be engulfed with an instantaneous release of energy!

Therefore, the transport immediately climbed into the air with no hesitation.

Though the heavy gravity did its best to pull it down to the ground, the transport had been modified to endure the increased strain. As one of the rare transports modified to deal with the heavy pull of the soil, the transport climbed higher and higher in the air with great difficulty.

The transport moved fast. Faster than any of the legged transports or mechs. The only reason why the Flagrant Swordmaidens relied on landbound transports instead for their ground forces was because the flying transports wouldn't be able to operate as they came within a certain range of the Starlight Megalodon.

For now though, the Flagrant Swordmaidens were only at the start of their journey. They could still receive aid from the fleet.

Everyone held their breaths as the flying transports slowly climbed higher and higher while approaching the location of the sacred gods. The transport slowed down once it hovered over the sacred gods.

It flew high enough in the sky that the sacred gods hadn't noticed the object in the air. The space barrier projected over the exobeasts also blocked their view from what was lurking from above.

As far as any of the natives and sacred gods were concerned, nothing could fly! Their limited worldview didn't incorporate flying objects. In fact, not a single bird made up part of the planet's artificial ecosystem.

"The transport is prepared to drop the power generators onto the projected path of the sacred gods, ma'am. The engineers aboard the transport are awaiting your orders."

Captain Byrd faced a difficult decision. Once they did this, they might suffer unintentional consequences. The sheer energy released from detonating three power generators at a time would deal a lot of damage to the environment.

In addition, losing those three power generators meant that the ground forces wouldn't be able to generate as much energy to replenish their energy. This created an even greater deficit in their energy budget that would be very hard to make up unless they figured out the secrets behind the god crystals that the natives used to call down an energy tornado.

"Is the camp at risk at this point?"

"We'll suffer light damage, ma'am, but the heavy cannons placed at the front of the camp will bear the brunt of the shockwave and emissions released from the simultaneous detonations."

Captain Byrd needed to make up her mind fast. If the sacred gods got any closer, the detonations would inflict increasingly serious damage to the camp!

Everyone feared what the Starlight Megalodon might think, but it was too late for regrets now.

"Drop the power generators in one minute. All mechs, pull back and put as much distance as possible!"

The rifleman mechs stopped firing their lasers and immediately turned tail to run. The melee mechs that had been prepared to face the sacred gods in melee did likewise!

Even the Vandals manning the huge artillery guns placed in the front of the camp all evacuated the weapons and sought out a better form of shelter.

A power generator deliberately induced to blow up at their maximum strength was no joke! The vast majority of cases where power generators malfunctioned only caused a single chamber to be annihilated, with most of the reactants left inert. A simple explosion wouldn't be able to cause these stable reactants to unleash their energy.

However, if manipulated in special circumstances, the reactants could be induced to unleash the majority of their energy at a single instant.

This was exactly what the engineers had done, and that was why every mech tried to get the hell away from the range of the impending detonations!

"Five, four, three, two, one, the power generators are dropping!"

Three objects fell out of the cargo hold in quick succession. The engineers placed each of the power generators into a makeshift aerodynamic shell in order to steer their fall a bit. Right now, they were dropping right into the path of the sacred gods.

Seconds passed as they kept falling and falling. They dropped at such a height to buy the flying transport enough time to escape the area.

"Everyone, brace yourselves!"

BOOOOOM!

A humongous explosion that combined the fury of three power generators detonated at the same took place in close proximity over the space barrier of the sacred gods.

All of the sensors the Vandals pointed towards the explosion temporarily went blind as a flood of light and heat and other emissions momentarily blinded them. The entire bunker shook horribly as the explosion also shook the surrounding terrain.

The energy released by the explosion was incredibly violent and had certainly scoured the entire area!

The camp wasn't exempt from the damage as most of the artillery cannons slightly became deformed and sustained other forms of damage. They paid for the cheap construction by being susceptible to damage!

The Akkara mechs fared much better as their superior alloys easily endured the repercussions of the explosion. The camp itself consisted of solid prefab structures that were designed to withstand a certain level of shock, so none of the buildings toppled over, though they did sustain some form of damage on the side facing the explosion.

As the worst of the blast slowly faded away, the smoke, heat and debris released from the blast formed into a mushroom cloud.

"What is the status of the targets?!"

"We're unable tell! Our sensors can't penetrate the cloud of heat and smoke!"

They needed to wait several more minutes until all of the debris and smoke and fire in the air finally faded away to allow the Vandals to see the result of their reckless action.

"The space barrier has disappeared! The sacred gods all show visible signs of injury!"

"Pairixan and Qilanxo are still alive and conscious!"

"All of the beast riders are gone! They've likely been burned or vaporized from the blast!"

Both beasts looked terrible. The three smaller sacred gods didn't show any signs of life.

All five beasts bore scorched and broken scales. Some of the damage dug deep into their flesh and charred it extensively.

The most important detail was that none of the beasts were projecting any forms of defense! Their god crystals had grown dim as defending their bodies from the incredibly powerful blast had overcome the formidable defenses of Qilanxo's space barrier and their personal defense fields!

"We're detecting strong seismic activity!"

"Pairixan is expending his final reserves of energy!"

"Don't let the beast pull off his final move! All mechs, get back into range and open fire on Pairixan!"

The Akkara mechs opened fire first. Their artillery shells landed accurately onto Pairixan after being fed targeting data from nearby sensors. The closest rifleman mechs turned back and peppered Pairixan with dozens of lasers.

This time, no space barrier or energy field stood in the way, and their absence made an immediate difference!

"It's just like slaughtering a wild god! Without their energy, they're just giant exobeasts with a lot of meat!"

Pairixan's huge size and strong layers of abnormally strong muscle and fat caused him to hold out for a minute, but the sheer weight of fire sent in his direction inevitably did him in. After some time, the Vandals became sure that Pairixan died.

They won!

Chapter 819 Cling to Life

Pairixan succumbed to the wounds inflicted by the shelling and lasers fired from an obnoxiously long distance away.

While Qilanxo's supreme defensive ability surprised the Flagrant Swordmaidens enormously, it didn't change the fact that the sacred gods remained vulnerable to attacks from a very long range.

Engaging an earth manipulator like Pairixan in close range where he could make the best use of his powers was pure stupidity. Though the Swordmaidens hunkered for a melee confrontation, the Vandals remained sober.

They really couldn't afford to lose a lot of mechs at this stage!

Every mech was precious and couldn't be replaced. While the same thing applied to the power generators as well, in the worst case the fleet would supply them with a substitute or two. While it wasn't simple to fabricate a new power generator from scratch, it was still a lot easier than fabricating a new mech.

The fleet may have arrived in the Aeon Corona System with an ample amount of supplies and materials, but it couldn't afford to waste them too much.

Once the Vandals confirmed Pairixan's death, the artillery mechs and laser rifleman mechs already started to aim their weapons towards the heavily-injured form of Qilanxo.

"Wait! Hold your fire!" Captain Byrd ordered before turning to an exobiologist. "Is it possible to take Qilanxo captive?"

This surprised the Vandals. This beast hindered the Flagrant Swordmaidens enormously. However, Qilanxo's power was extremely formidable. If they could turn Qilanxo into their pet, they might be able to benefit from her supreme defenses!

Once they got around to this idea, a couple of Vandals looked at the projection of Qilanxo's heavily injured form with greedy eyes.

This was their chance to tame a sacred god!

The exobiologist in the command center didn't immediately answer Captain Byrd's question. He held out a palm and accessed a private comm channel. After a quick discussion with Dr. Tillman and some other exobiologist, he gave out his answer in an uncertain tone.

"Captain, according to what we know of the physique of the wild gods, Qilanxo may be far too injured to survive. It is a question whether she will be able to live for more than a few hours. If you wish for us to capture her, then we will first need to treat her wounds and insure she lives past this day."

"What are the drawbacks of doing so?"

"We will need to draw upon a large amount of medical supplies. Some are easily reproduced, but some of the medicines can only be sourced from the pharmaceutical companies. If we expend more medicine on making sure that Qilanxo can survive, we'll have less to draw upon once our own men sustain injuries. In fact, it is not certain yet if our intervention will be sufficient enough to save Qilanxo's life."

This decision required some consideration. After Captain Byrd received a document that contained an estimate on how many medical supplies would be expended in an attempt to save Qilanxo's life, she fell into a brief dilemma.

"Ma'am, we just lost three power generators." An engineer spoke. "This will shorten our range and affect our future operations. Right now, our research into the god crystal and murky crystal haven't been able to turn up any concrete results. If we have a living sacred god such as Qilanxo in our custody, we can study the exobeast's method of activating her god crystals and find a way to replicate the process."

The exobiologist also displayed his eagerness. "Qilanxo is one of the Eastern Samar Pantheon's most powerful sacred gods, and is on par with Hokaz from Mulak. As an old, powerful sacred god that has received a lot of nurturing, it is extremely useful for us if we can study her body while she still remains alive."

The exobiologists were already clamoring to dissect the burned and broken corpses of Pairixan and the other sacred gods, but no matter how well-preserved they may be, there was only so much to learn from the autopsies. A living subject would be able to reveal much more about the strange and abnormal god species, especially under long-term observation!

Of course, practical problems also emerged. The site around Qilanxo and the corpses of all the other sacred gods was surrounded with heat and radiation. How would the exobiologists get close enough to treat the beast? Would Qilanxo remain docile? How would they be able to move the giant beast?

"We will have to perform triage on-site and restrain her in place." The exobiologist said. "Unless the engineers can move something as heavy as an older sacred god, we will have to construct a treatment facility on-site."

There was no way to move something as big and heavy as Qilanxo. Her size surpassed a hundred-year old wild god, and was significantly heavier than a heavy mech. Unless the Vandals cobbled up a customized construction designed to move extremely heavy loads, the only other way to move the defeated sacred god was by getting her to move under her own power.

In the end, Captain Byrd decided that all of the trouble would be worth the payoff. It was important to note that Qilanxo's god crystals still remained in place and even appeared to feed a small amount of energy into her body, helping it maintain her life.

After consulting with Commander Lydia, they both agreed to save Qilanxo's life.

"Move out and secure the site!"

The exobiologists began packing up their supplies while the engineers readied a small prefab facility to form a temporary lab. Chief Dakkon already prepared to construct a bigger temporary facility to cover up Qilanxo's form and to provide a more controlled environment to facilitate her recovery.

A large amount of melee mechs emerged to come into close proximity to the defeated attackers. One of the Swordmaiden Devil Razors even poked at Pairixan's corpse, only to elicit no response.

"Hey, woman! Don't poke a hole in that corpse! That's valuable research material!"

"Don't call me woman, you filthy Vandal!"

A lot of mech pilots couldn't resist posing next to the fallen beasts and have their comrades record an image for posterity.

It was as if they had personally helped slay the sacred gods, which was very far from the actual truth!

Ves shook his head at their behavior. At the very least, their constant poking and prodding tentatively confirmed that Pairixan wouldn't wake up and engulf the entire area with earthquakes.

"Please inspect Qilanxo if she's conscious."

One of the mechs walked in front of Qilanxo's huge lizard-like form. Now that their mechs had all gotten close, they clearly saw Qilanxo drawing breath. It must have been hard to breathe in the dust and heat-laden air, but the god species could easily handle worse. They possessed resilient, adaptable bodies that could survive many different environments.

This was also why the exobiologists were reasonably certain that she'd be able to survive!

"Qilanxo isn't responding to our actions." Captain Orfan who was also on site reported. "I think this big beast is too injured to care about us. Do you want us to nudge her or something?"

An exobiologist became alarmed. "Please don't disturb Qilanxo's rest, Captain Orfan! Qilanxo is incredibly pained right now and regaining her consciousness will only exacerbate her injuries."

"Fine! Whatever you say, doc!"

The exobiologists and other medical experts already loaded a fast transport with as much medical supplies they could bring on short notice. They took their seats and let the legged transport take them towards the dangerous site.

Though the heat and radiation posed a threat to their bodies, their hazard suits provided them with sufficient protection against the aftermath of the furious blasts.

A few questions began to pop up among the men.

"Why did Pairixan die while Qilanxo managed to stay alive? Isn't she weaker than her mate?"

"She's oriented towards defense while Pairixan favors offense. The space barrier also completely centers around her, protecting her body the best from the initial blast until it couldn't withstand the damage anymore."

It took some time for the Vandals and Swordmaidens to wind down from the battle. One concern remained, though.

"What is the status of Pailanon and his subordinates. Have they come closer?"

"Pailanon has taken his subordinates and reentered the city as soon as he witnessed the explosion. He lost his courage, ma'am."

The Vandals couldn't replicate such an explosion without crippling their energy generation, but Pailanon didn't know that. If the enemy could strike with such force once against Pairixan, what did that mean for Pailanon if he took up his younger brother's mantle?

He'd be crazy to attack a force with such a devastating weapon!

Besides, now that Pairixan was likely dead, the eastern side of the city instantly became ownerless! The junior sacred god that Pairixan left behind was the only living member of the Eastern Samar Pantheon, which would likely be dissolved this day. There was no way Pailanon would let a single sacred god stop him from claiming the ancient city of Samar once and for all!

With the older brother preoccupied with raiding Pairixan's belongings in the city, the Vandals and the Swordmaidens rested a little easier. At the very least, they didn't have to fight another powerful exobeast after expending a great amount of effort to defeat Pairixan's group.

There was one other faction on the planet that the Flagrant Swordmaidens needed to take note of. "Has the Starlight Megalodon launched any weapons?"

"We've detected no abnormalities on our long-ranged sensors. The fleet hasn't sent down a shuttle to inform us of any threats they detected from orbit either."

The Vandals still felt uneasy. The Starlight Megalodon continued to loom over their heads as a latent threat.

Fortunately, as several hours went by, their fears subsided as nothing happened. The explosion evidently fell within the battleship's tolerance range.

It wasn't wise to test the Starlight Megalodon on this matter. Hopefully, their next encounter with the natives wouldn't be so fraught as what happened today.

With the alert level lowering down from red to yellow, the Vandals and Swordmaidens stopped holing up in their bunkers and shelters and began to pick up their duties again. Ves yearned to see Qilanxo up close but he had no reason to do so. Mech designers like Ves wouldn't be able to help in any of the duties. He'd only be in other people's way.

As some of the exobiologists already started treating some of the surface wounds of the unconscious sacred god, others started beginning their preliminary studies on the remains of the four dead sacred gods.

The engineers even approached one of the god crystals and began to take a large amount of scans.

A lot of work needed to be done to process their spoils of war. The researchers among the Vandals long dreamt of obtaining the corpses and the sole surviving sacred god. While the explosion caused a lot of damage, there was still more than enough left intact to perform extensive studies.

Everyone wanted to see what made the sacred gods tick! What distinguished them from the wild gods? How were they able to manipulate the god crystals while Chief Dakkon couldn't even get his own specimen to glow?

All of these puzzles might soon be answered, especially with the help of Qilanxo, whose breath grew a little more even now that the exobiologists had begun to treat her wounds and sedate her with a potent substance.

As Ves returned to the mech workshop to prepare for the inevitable raft of repairs as some of the mechs had been affected by the shockwave, Ketis also entered and plopped her armored form onto an available seat.

"I wanted to go off and see the beasts up close, but they wouldn't let me!"

Ves chuckled. "If they let every random Vandal or Swordmaiden up close, there would be no one left to man the camp. Besides, you'll get your chance soon enough."

"How so?" She frowned. A mech designer had nothing to do with a living beast.

"If my guess is right, they'll eventually want to put someone onto Qilanxo's back, if she will let us. That will be my time to shine."

Chapter 820 Talkative Jimmy

Losing the three power generators seriously affected the energy budget of the Vandals over time. The projections became so bad that the Swordmaidens temporarily lent one of theirs to them until the fleet shipped over a spare power generator they cobbled up out of spare parts and materials.

All of the power released in the form of heat, pressure, electromagnetic radiation and etcetera could have been employed to feed their mechs and transports of their voracious hunger for juice.

Still, it was for a good cause. If the Flagrant Swordmaidens sent their melee mechs against Pairixan, then the result would have been no different than throwing an egg against a rock.

The Vandals still suffered from the lingering trauma from the battle against the Frosty Meteors. When a raiding regiment like the Flagrant Vandals directly attacked a detachment of the heavy assault regiment of the Frosty Meteors in a desperate head-on clash, the side with the lighter and less resilient mechs lost seriously!

The only reason why they won the battle against the Frosty Meteors was because they underestimated the determination of the Vandals and engaged with too few mechs.

Still, the sheer quality and resilience of their medium and heavy mechs had unavoidably exacted a painful price to the Vandals, who heavily relied on mobility to avoid the strong points of the enemy and exploit their weak points.

After the battle ended, the recovery began. Support personnel buzzed about as they took care of multiple tasks. The camp sustained some damage that caused several pieces of equipment to fail.

A lot of mechs also sustained light damage. To some mechs, the damage remained cosmetic, but some other mechs needed another round of servicing in order to work out their kinks.

Right now, the focus of the ground forces lay in taking in their spoils. A raft of science officers, doctors, exobiologists, engineers and other experts descended upon ground zero. Everyone either participated in the study of the sacred god carcasses or performed preliminary scans on their only live prisoner.

A modest amount of Vandal and Swordmaiden melee mechs stood guard next to the unconscious form of Qilanxo, the Shield of Samar. The best doctors and exobiologists collaborated to prop up her life and prevent her many serious injuries from joining the rest of the Eastern Samar Pantheon into death.

Withstanding the combined explosions of three power generators at ground zero was no joke!

Still, the fact that she didn't immediately succumb to the powerful explosion impressed the men and women. In their dreams, they imagined taming this powerful sacred god and leverage her powers for their own benefit.

There wasn't a single Vandal or Swordmaiden who wasn't impressed by the strength of her space barrier!

It withstood so much shelling and laser fire without unduly straining Qilanxo's energy reserves. While energy screens existed which offered a comparable amount of shielding, heavy damage quickly drained their capacitors, causing them to run dry as soon as they endured a single salvo of explosive shells!

Therefore, true value in Qilanxo's space barrier lay in the fact that she could potentially keep it up for an hour, if not more!

If employed in the right circumstances, she could protect a position long enough from enemy fire and increase their options in battle.

It went without saying that trying to subdue and tame Qilanxo became one of their highest priorities!

Of course, studying the other sacred gods also needed to be done. The other sacred gods were too young and weak to be of importance, so the exobiologists quickly performed deeply invasive studies on their carcasses now that they could still be called fresh.

The only carcass worth building a freezer chamber around was the one that belonged to Pairixan. The extremely powerful sacred god was considerably old and powerful and certainly deserved more care. The engineers in particular wanted to decipher how Pairixan managed to draw power from his plentiful god crystals and if they could somehow replicate this ability.

In the meantime, the Flagrant Swordmaidens kept a wary eye on the ancient city of Samar. Fortunately, it appeared Pailanon mainly preoccupied himself with taking over the eastern side of the city. Now that his younger brother bit off more than he could chew, the older brother had the entire city for himself!

"Pailanon isn't showing any signs of taking revenge." A well-informed Vandal told him one day during mealtime. Talkative Jimmy earned himself a reputation among the Vandals for being a well-informed gossip, though he had an unfortunate habit of embellishing his stories sometimes. "All talk of going out to confront us in battle is being stifled by Pailanon's supplicants. Half the city is afraid of us, while the other half is afraid of the only remaining heir to the Great Father."

"I imagine that our continued presence here next to the city is giving Pailanon a lot of pressure." Ves remarked as he consumed a simple meal reconstituted out of nutrient packs.

Despite all the demands, the cooks weren't allowed to process the sacred god meat yet. The meat had been laced with too much radiation. All the anti-radiation treatments they had on hand was being spent on helping Qilanxo recover. The doctors had no spare anti-rads left to clean up the carcasses to satisfy the men's voracious hunger for sacred god meat.

The allure of eating the flesh that many natives worshipped as gods still held a perverse attraction to the Vandals and Swordmaidens.

If they wanted to eat more god meat, they'd just have to hunt down another wild god.

Talkative Jimmy smiled in a lazy manner. "Now that we bagged ourselves some sacred gods, we don't need to trade with Samar anymore. We've harvested so many god crystals that there's no use trying to trade for more. In fact, I heard that Captain Byrd intends to ignore all the ancient cities from now on. As soon as we finish our repairs and rein in Qilanxo, she intends for us to head straight to the Starlight Megalodon."

The Flagrant Swordmaidens lingered long enough near their starting point. A long trek awaited the ground expedition. It would take months or a year to reach the Starlight Megalodon, but they weren't alone. If they didn't move out soon enough, their rivals might reach the battleship first!

The only reasons why Ves didn't worry about getting overtaken by others was because the race to the Starlight Megalodon was a marathon, not a sprint. The incredible distance and the difficult circumstances strained the logistical capabilities of any mech force on the ground.

Ves predicted that the pirates may not have been as well-prepared as they thought. Perhaps only the Vesians brought sufficient supplies to make it all the way to the battleship on their own.

As for the rest? The underprepared pirates and other scum would probably resort to the only solution they always fell back on. Ves figured they would attempt to plunder others to get what they needed, be it the ancient cities or their rivals.

"What do the Vandals think of Captain Byrd's leadership so far?"

"She's okay for a commanding officer. Captain Byrd is kind of like Colonel Lowenfield, in a way." Jimmy carefully said. Obviously, he didn't want to say anything about about the captain. "They're both meticulous to the point of slowing us all down, but they both do right by us. Still, not everyone is satisfied with how she's taking her time with matters."

"Is Captain Orfan agitating the men?"

"Oh, she grumbles all the time, but everyone is used to her. She always runs her mouth when she isn't satisfied, but she has no chance of changing anything as long as Captain Byrd is calling the shots."

"Then who else is dissatisfied?"

Talkative Jimmy gazed at Ves with a shifty expression. He leaned in to whisper, which was completely useless as the auditory sensors in the mess hall recorded every possible sound no matter how soft they spoke.

Ves could have activated his signal jammer to ensure privacy, but he didn't bother as they were just engaging in idle gossip right now.

"A few mech pilots are beginning to hang out with Venerable Xie." Jimmy whispered. Did he even know that he might as well talk normally? "Our new expert pilot isn't a big of a snob as Venerable O'Callahan. Our old expert pilot

never mingled with the rank-and-file, but it's completely different with Venerable Xie. He's welcomed a small number of mech pilots in his circle."

Hearing this made his stomach drop. Ves suddenly lost his appetite. He hadn't put his likely failed attempt at brainwashing the expert pilot on his mind lately due to recent events, but the matter with the foreigner-turned-Vandal continued to tick like a bomb in their very midst.

"What is Venerable Xie doing with these mech pilots?"

"I heard he's taking them under his wing. That man can pilot almost any mech and is good at a lot of different things. There's not a single mech pilot who he can't help. Venerable Xie only started his tutoring very recently and he already earned a rabid fanbase. Even the Swordmaidens want a piece of the action!"

What Talkative Jimmy described to Ves sounded like a prelude to building up his own faction. The problem was that expert pilots enjoyed such a high status and their piloting skills were so good that almost no mech pilot would be able to resist the temptation!

This was an opportunity to receive tutoring from an expert pilot! Compared to Venerable O'Callahan's unfriendliness and disdain towards the Vandals, the new expert pilot uncharacteristically engaged with lowly mortals.

"That's not normal." Ves stated. "An expert's time is precious. They're always training or preparing for the next battle to come. While it's not unusual for experts to offer some tips to mech pilots, it's not an efficient use of their time."

This especially went for Karol Xie who long stalled in his growth to greater heights. As someone who had entered the realm of experts long ago and only made it up to eight laverses of resonance strength, he had a long way to go.

Instead of trying to work hard to improve his somewhat meager strength among experts, he bewilderingly opted to act as a nanny to other mech pilots.

There was no other reason to do so except to gain a deeper foothold within the Vandals.

It might not sound like much right now, but if he continued to draw in others, then Captain Byrd's authority would be undermined!

Worst of all, Captain Byrd lacked the power and standing to prevent Venerable Xie from doing whatever he wanted. Even if she was aware of what the expert pilot might be up to, she could not go against the will of the mech pilots in this regard.

Not many expert pilots actually chose to exercise their authority. The few that did often became extremely powerful.

Among Larkinson's own family, his uncle Ark who presided over Citadel Havensworth was one of the most brilliant examples of this. As demigods, they naturally commanded respect, which empowered their leadership abilities!

Talkative Jimmy kept glancing at Ves as if he anticipated some reaction. "You don't much like Venerable Xie, do you?"

Ves tried to figure out Jimmy's motives. Who's camp was he in? His intuition told him that while Jimmy showed some hero worship towards the expert pilot, it hadn't reached a point of no return.

Perhaps he could make use of Jimmy. He'd have to be careful though. Ves did not want to draw any ire upon himself.

"Expert pilots are expert pilots. Yet they are humans as well. We barely know him and he's still too new to the Vandals and the Mech Corps. It's not unusual for the mech pilots to become his fans, but they shouldn't forget their duties. We serve the Republic, not a single individual. That is the Vesian way."

Talkative Jimmy grinned at Ves. "Spoken like a true Brighter."

"Someone needs to retain their clarity through all of the madness that happened recently."

As if Ves was any better.