

### Chapter 821 Exercising Leadership

Ves leaned back in his chair while playing with the mechanism that allowed him to draw the Cadisis from his vambrace. The C22 Earth Ant fit him well so far, and Ves was satisfied with its comfort and level of protection. Out here in the field, none of the Vandals or Swordmaidens ever shed their suits and combat armor unless they took a shower or something.

Many even slept in their suits in case they needed to wake up during an emergency.

Still, the bulk and weight of the suits hindered everyone's movements and slowed down their work. This didn't matter too much to Ves who mostly worked behind a terminal, but many of the mech technicians still weren't used to servicing mechs while encumbered with hazard suits and the like.

Ves tutted in disappointment. "These screw-ups are slowing us down."

It didn't help that some miscellaneous tools and equipment started failing at random. One day, a floating bot carrying a mech part shut down out of the blue, causing it and its part to fall down right on top of a team of mech technicians.

Ves and the chief technicians rapidly revised the safety rules after that incident. From now on, the bots and mech technicians moved in their own demarcated areas of the workshops.

These inexplicable failures reminded Ves and the others that the negative effects of the astral winds continued to wear down upon their machines. Nothing could prevent the turbulence in spacetime from messing about with their machines, especially when they were active.

Ves particularly concerned himself over their 3D printers. Having reconstructed one from the ground up in the past, he knew very clearly how

many small and delicate components these printers relied upon to perform their complex tasks.

This was why he added a daily routine to the already-heavy workload of the mech technicians. They needed to perform a detailed diagnostic of the 3D printer and some of their more sensitive tools such as the plasma cutters.

It would be catastrophic if the plasma cutters lost containment and spilled over all of that hot plasma over the hazard suit of the mech technician using the tool! As much as hazard suits claimed to be resistant to heat, hot plasma meant to slowly cut through mech armor would instantly burn through the surface of a hazard suit without any delay!

"It's like herding cats all day!"

Too much work needed to be done. Mechs had to be repaired, safety routines needed to be revised, screw-ups needed to get fixed and the mech technicians had to get their heads straightened out.

It didn't help that Ves had to pick up the slack when some of the newly-promoted chief technicians failed to do their work. The Vandals still suffered from the assassination of some of the old officers and chiefs.

While it did help him exercise his leadership abilities and make him more adept at commanding the men and women, Ves quickly became annoyed at how many fires he had to put out every day.

As a perennial delegator, Ves began to think of a way to fob off the work to someone else. Ves had better things to do with his time than to solve every little problem by himself. He turned to the only mech designer without any defined duties.

"Ketis."

"Yes, Ves?" The young woman turned to Ves with a clueless expression.

"I think it's time for you to learn how to supervise the mech technicians."

"Uhh... no thanks. I'm fine with letting them do their own thing."

"You're not a real mech designer until you take control over your own workshop. Come on, Ketis, it's for your own good. You're theoretical foundation is good enough to solve the vast majority of problems that crop up in the workshops. It will be an interesting learning experience for you. Once you go back to the Swordmaidens, you'll be able to take control over some of Mayra's duties in her stead. Isn't that what you always wanted?"

Through some persuasion on her part, Ves convinced his student to take over some of his work in supervising the workshop.

Though it was rather improper for a Swordmaiden mech designer to be intimately involved with the operation of Vandal workshop, no one cared enough to put a halt to the practice. Ves enjoyed a considerable amount of respect and fear from the rank-and-file through his frequent contributions.

The Vandals knew he suggested wild plan to overload the power generators and throw them onto the invading sacred god. Though costly in many ways, it beat the alternatives and prevented them from suffering more casualties.

Of course, he also earned a lot of fear from his earlier experiments. In fact, the mech pilots enjoyed a temporary reprieve as the dwarf captives normally being exploited at the Mind Blender all rested inside Pairixan's dead stomach right now.

Captain Byrd already sent out some scouts to capture more dwarf chieftains and warriors from the surrounding tribes, but it took time to replenish the Mind Blender's cells with new captives to resume the mental resilience training sessions.

In any case, all of these contributions made Ves unassailable in a way. In the absence of a higher-ranking mech designer such as a Journeyman or Professor Velten herself, nobody truly knew how much authority Ves held.

Captain Byrd might be the only person who could rein him in, but she got swamped with so much work that she hardly paid attention to anything that wasn't urgent in some way.

Therefore, the Vandal mech technicians started to become accustomed to taking orders from a Swordmaiden.

The good news was that the mech technicians assigned to the ground expedition hadn't formed a negative impression of Ketis. Unlike the mech technicians back aboard the Shield of Hispania, the work crews on the ground hadn't witnessed her saying anything negative to the mech technicians, so she essentially started on a blank slate.

Though the Vandals all learned by now that the Swordmaidens extensively relied on slaves, they became extremely proficient at ignoring circumstances that didn't directly involve themselves. It wasn't as if their hands were entirely clean either.

For the next few days, Ves showed her the ropes. Despite the uncertainties surrounding her actual authority, with Ves by her side he essentially instilled the message that Ketis formed an extension of his own considerable authority.

That helped out a lot with the initial pushback, though for some reason many mech technicians continued to resist her instructions.

Ketis frowned as she watched the work crews go right back to their old habits despite being told to do otherwise by her just then. It was as if she didn't exist!

"What do I do when the men don't listen?"

"You give them a good kick in the butt." Ves replied without remorse. "It's not the proper way to lead the men. If these are your own employees, then you need to worm your way into their hearts and earn their respect. That's not possible in some cases. Sometimes in your life you're being put into a situation where you have to take charge of a random crew of mech technicians who don't know you and don't respect you. That's when you have to have to get physical."

That sounded very familiar to Ketis. She already started to grin. "How far can I push the men?"

Ves noticed that she got the wrong idea. "It's not about the pain, nor is it about punishment. Nothing good will come if you put the mech technicians in the infirmary. The goal is to make it clear to them that you're the top dog in the workshop. It's a dominance game. They're much more willing to follow your cues if they fear the consequences of earning your ire."

"So I basically have to bully them until they're scared of me?"

"It's not bullying. It's exercising leadership."

"Is there a difference?"

"Sometimes, there isn't." Ves admitted. "Bullying your way into authority is a short-term solution when time is short and you don't have anything better to rely upon. The true challenge is to transition into a more dependable form of leadership. You can't keep bullying the mech technicians and expect them to work hard and with passion."

"So I have to make them like me?" She frowned. "I don't see how I can do that when they see me as a bully."

Ves smirked. "There is a thing called Stockholm Syndrome. People's mentalities can be remarkably pliable when you exert the right pressure on them. The key is to use both kindness and harshness to indoctrinate them into

following your orders blindly. When they no longer question you whenever you tell them to do something, that's when you've succeeded in turning them into your lackies."

Through his hard work and continuous efforts, Ves had long reached this stage among the Vandals. Ketis had a long way to go in comparison, but by keeping tabs on her progress, Ves might learn a thing or two himself about taking charge.

Having observed how people like Captain Orfan, Captain Byrd and Major Verle exercised their leadership continued to enrich his own understanding of this critical skill.

Following his student's evolution on this area allowed him to confirm some of his theories and refine his future approach.

Once he finished his instructions, he pushed Ketis onwards, who walked menacingly towards the lacksadasical mech technicians. In her heavy combat armor, she made for an intimidating sight and slightly towered over the mech technicians who predominantly wore hazard suits.

"Alright, you lazy bums, since you're so thick-headed that you think you know better than me, it's time for a lesson from your Great Auntie Ketis! GET OVER HERE YOU SAD EXCUSES OF MECH TECHNICIANS!"

In the following ten minutes, she essentially browbeat the mech technicians into acknowledging her dominance. The chief technician who attempted to intervene got smacked into the ground by Ketis, instantly imprinting the image into the memories of everyone who was present.

She no longer brooked any nonsense from the ineffective chief technicians!

Sometimes, the one with the biggest fist had the most say. The Swordmaidens already ingrained this rule into their bones, but the Vandals weren't entirely accustomed to this brutish method of asserting authority.

The presence of Ves at the sidelines any attempts at calling for higher authority to stop the bullying. His implicit permission and approval for Ketis to do her own thing was already a silent message in itself. Besides, it wasn't as if she actually asked for much.

Ketis did not let her power over the mech technicians inflate her mind. She kept her priorities straight and focused on correcting mistakes and compelling the mech technicians to do their work properly instead of abusing her power for petty power games.

After a few days of handholding, Ves became reassured that Ketis know how to push the mech technicians into action, to the point where he felt his presence wouldn't be needed anymore.

"I'm very proud of you, Ketis." He unabashedly praised his student. "Your Swordmaiden methods may not be all that appropriate, but you dialed them back sufficiently so that the men won't hate you that much."

She smirked contemptuously at the mech technicians. "They're not that different from our slaves back at the Swordmaidens. They're all sheep. These ones just forgot that and needed a firm reminder."

Ves wasn't entirely sure it was healthy to look at the mech technicians in that light.

"There is more to leading the mech technicians than making sure they comply with your instructions. True leadership goes beyond that, and attempts to motivate them into working harder on their own accord. A true leader would be able to draw out their latent potential and increase their performance beyond the norm."

"Like Commander Lydia?"

"That's a very good example." Ves smiled. "Think about how Commander Lydia built a strong pirate outfit out of nothing in the span of a couple of

decades. It takes more than terrorizing her Swordmaidens to grow to this point. Do you think you can be the next Commander Lydia?"

Ketis looked uncertain of herself. Filling the shoes of a legendary pirate commander took a lot of guts!

"You can do it, Ketis. You're destined for more. I believe in you."

She finally let out a relieved smile. "Thanks."

### Chapter 822 At A Loss

Now that Ves successfully delegated his supervision duties to Ketis, his schedule finally freed up a lot.

He felt bad about pushing all of the repetitive, banal and rage-inducing work to his student, but the problems that constantly popped up should provide her with plenty of practice in solving mildly complicated technical issues.

Some of the other Vandal mech designers felt that Ves bypassed them entirely for no reason.

He didn't care. He was in charge and they were not. Ves didn't trust any of them to wield their powers responsibly.

Trust. Competence. Power. All of these intertwined at multiple levels among the ground expedition.

At the very top, the co-leadership of Captain Byrd and Commander Lydia led to a harmonious relationship so far, but how long would that last? The Swordmaidens had their own way of doing things, and Commander Lydia's authority was equal to Major Verle's.

Captain Byrd only held the upper hand so far because the Vandals possessed many more capabilities the Swordmaidens lacked. The Vandals not only brought more supplies, but they also retained many experts and science-minded support staff that continuously helped them with the natives.

Without the continued efforts of the exobiologists, the Flagrant Swordmaidens wouldn't have been able to figure out the wild gods and demystify their capabilities.

Hundreds of experts helped with studying the remains of Pairixan and the other dead sacred gods right now.

In particular, they collected all of their god crystals after studying how the surrounding flesh interacted with these foreign object and tried to study their internal structure to see how they managed to influence the astral winds.

Other experts including Dr. Tillman succeeded in nursing Qilanxo back to life after several close brushes with death. While she remained heavily injured, the giant exobeast no longer worsened in health.

The continuous efforts of these experts gave the Vandals a lot of prominence over the Swordmaidens who only knew how to chop their enemies with their swords. Their time hadn't come yet. Once the ground expedition collided with the mech forces sent down by their rivals, then that would be their time to shine.

Ves figured that Commander Lydia was biding her time right now. She kept a low profile and allowed the Vandals to take the limelight so far. The Swordmaidens rigorously adhered to their existing routines and always trained for the next fight where they might actually be of use.

That battle would come, sooner or later, and at that time the Swordmaidens would make themselves known.

On a lower level, the undercurrent slowly started to surge. Venerable Xie continued to expand his circle bit by bit. Though many mech pilots wanted to receive his tutoring, he focused most of his efforts into empowering his first fans and his most loyal core.

To Ves, it seemed as if Venerable Xie was biding his time as well. Just like Commander Lydia, he refused to set off waves and instead attempted to work below most people's radar.

Ves himself actually enjoyed no official authority over the Vandal mech technicians, yet no one drew any attention to this technicality. The responsibilities he claimed for himself went far beyond the strictly advisory capacity he was supposed to fulfill.

His high degree of competence alone convinced every mech technician that putting him in charge would be the best for all of them. They may not like him personally, but they would rather have him in charge than someone else.

Too bad they got Ketis instead of Ves the last few days.

Compared to Ves, she lacked the competence to solve all the technical challenges that came up during their repairs. Her inexperience even led her to provide deeply flawed solutions to some of the more challenging problems.

This didn't help her at all, though she at least recognized she was outmatched when she failed. Ves had to step in and clean up her messes in those instances.

Still, what she lacked in competence, she made up for it with gumption. In the instances where she didn't automatically command everyone's obedience, she bullied the mech technicians into taking her seriously.

Sometimes, she let her failures get the better of her. Her work didn't go all that smoothly and whenever she failed or fell short, her frustration built up and caused her to forget her limits.

During those times, she forgot that she wasn't dealing with hardened Swordmaidens or Swordmaidens-in-training. Several mech technicians got carted off to the infirmary to treat their broken bones and other serious injuries.

If it happened once or twice, then Ves wasn't inclined to look. Now that such incidents happened five times over several days, Ves could no longer stay on the sidelines.

"Didn't I tell you it's not about hurting the men?" Ves took Ketis aside one day. "Injuring the mech technicians is a means to an end that comes at a price. You need to be more stingy with how much violence you dole out."

"I'm sorry, Ves, but I'm not as good as you. These stupid problems continue to annoy the hell out of me. How could they screw up so often?!" She cried out her frustration.

"This is the hardest part to supervising a workshop where a lot of complex repairs are taking place. It may look difficult at first, but once you deal with the problems for a month, you'll slowly find out that they aren't so different from each other. You don't have to wrack your brains all the time to develop a new solution when an old one suffices."

Ves basically told her to stick with her job despite her initial setbacks because the experiences she went through now would help her out enormously later on. Knowing how mechs broke and failed enabled mech designers to develop new machines that avoided the mistakes of other designs.

Though she didn't see the value yet, Ketis reluctantly continued to perform her duties, but with a more mindful touch this time.

If Ves wanted Ketis to take over some of his work, then he needed to make sure she didn't drop the ball too much. Otherwise he'd be forced to resume those duties.

Ves didn't opt to delegate his most tedious work duties because he wanted to sit back and relax. No. If Ves wanted to buy some time for himself, he always had a goal in mind.

Ves turned his attention to Qilanxo. To be more precise, her ability to interface with the mind of the natives.

He received a standing invitation from Dr. Tillman to help her out with a difficult project. He moved over to ground zero of the explosion that wiped out much of the Eastern Samar Pantheon.

One full week after the battle, the Vandals cleaned up the battlefield. They chopped up and moved away the remains of Pairixan and the other sacred gods and studied them elsewhere under more controlled conditions.

In the meantime, they built a makeshift prison around Qilanxo, though no restraints could ever be strong enough to stop her from thrashing it if she exerted her strength.

So far, Qilanxo remained docile and didn't act up in any way. She exhibited enough intelligence to realize that the Vandals worked hard to save her life and help her recover from her wounds.

Ves entered the prison built around Qilanxo's massive bulk and witnessed her lying down on tiled surface with alloy restraints locking her limbs.

"Thank you for coming, Mr. Larkinson." Dr. Tillman greeted him with the respect of a fellow professional.

"No problem, doc."

Over time, the Vandals learned to disregard her fairly young age. Despite being in her thirties, Dr. Tillman's knowledge and competence surpassed her older peers. She turned out to be a genius in the same way as Ves, and people often regarded them as the same type of person.

Ves grew curious how someone as brilliant as Dr. Tillman ended up with the Vandals, but it wasn't polite to ask. If she wanted him to know her story, she would tell it to him on her own accord.

For now, they both had jobs to do.

"Captain Byrd has ordered us to subdue Qilanxo and attempt to convert her into an asset for the Vandals. Whether that is through allowing her to operate on her own or with a Vandal volunteering to be her beast rider, we don't know yet. Our imprisoned sacred god isn't entirely forthcoming when we attempt to communicate with her. No matter what, we did bomb her mate and her offspring to death."

"One of those smaller exobeasts is her child?" Ves frowned. "How come she hasn't gone berserk yet?"

Dr. Tillman smiled. "Exobeasts are capable of spawning many godling offspring. She must have birthed hundreds if not thousands of children with her union with Pairixan. Generally, the god species don't care too much about the life or death of a single child, even if he or she has been nurtured into a sacred god. Those who die prematurely are too weak."

She reminded Ves that he shouldn't equate her as a human. These god species thought in very different patterns.

"How sure are you of this observation?"

"Qilanxo told us that ourselves, likely in an attempt to reduce our vigilance towards her. When she first regained her consciousness, we posted an alarming number of armed mechs around her form. The presence of those mechs distressed her a lot. Eventually, we came to a compromise where she wouldn't act up in exchange for moving those mechs further away."

"That sounds incredibly dangerous. What if she is plotting some form of revenge?"

"We made a calculated risk to trust her word, however little we can get out of the beast. In order to build up trust with Qilanxo, we have to show that we respect her as an entity."

"So how does she communicate with you guys? So far, all she does is roar at you, right?"

"We mostly make due with asking questions that can be answered with a yes and no response. A long roar is a yes, while a short roar is a no. So far, it seems that Qilanxo is able to understand standard human language without any need for an interpreter. It's fascinating to see definitive proof that the sacred gods are sentient alien species."

Sentient meant that Qilanxo was more than a dumb beast who only made decisions according to her instincts. If she was truly sentient, then she'd be able to process complex thoughts and interact with the Vandals on a more equal level.

She still remained their prisoner though, and Qilanxo very much knew that.

"Since I'm here to find a way to get Qilanxo to interface with one of our mech pilots, has Qilanxo been cooperative in the matter?"

"Not quite." Dr. Tillman frowned. "We believe the matter of her beast rider is a more sensitive subject. Qilanxo cared more about her chosen than her own mate and her dead offspring. Our psychologists believe that Qilanxo is still traumatised by the loss of her human companion. Their bond was very deep."

This sounded rather touching to Ves. It also sprung a lot of strange ideas related to his design philosophies. Would he ever be able to reach the point where he designed a mech that cared for its mech pilots as deeply as Qilanxo pined for her companion?

Ves didn't care about Qilanxo's losses before, but hearing about her deeply traumatic separation with her beast rider affected him deeply in his heart.

It was as if his design philosophy offered its condolences to Qilanxo.

He quickly shook his head and tried to clear his mind. "So since Qilanxo is still grieving for the loss of her chosen, will we ever get a mech pilot to try and interface with her mind?"

"That plan is still on track, and due to your expertise in neural interfaces, however limited it may be, you are in charge of this project. By the time our expedition is scheduled to move, Captain Byrd hopes to see a mech pilot riding atop Qilanxo."

Ves gazed at the silent and morose sacred god. The challenge was immense. Yet there was no other choice. "I'll do it. I don't know how I can get Qilanxo to accept a new beast rider, but I'll find a way."

#### **Chapter 823 Beast Rider Projec**

Qilanxo. The second-oldest and most powerful sacred god of the Eastern Samar Pantheon. The mate to Pairixan and a mother of more than a thousand godlings. This was an entity who lived through more than ten of Ves' lifetimes.

She had seen sacred gods and blessed people rise and fall. She experienced the turmoil after the Great Father Pairaxis perished abruptly without designating an heir for his two most promising sons.

She survived the giant explosion that felled Pairixan, her mate, and Piezonis, her strongest son and a sacred god who was a bit more than a hundred years old. This only highlighted her formidable defensive powers. She handedly outperformed an entire mech company of heavy knight mechs in terms of enduring destructive shelling!

Now, Qilanxo fell into the laps of the Flagrant Swordmaidens. The Western Samar Pantheon that still reigned over the ancient city of Samar seemed more interested in taking over the eastern side of the city than taking revenge for Pairixan's folly.

Ves bet that she knew that she had been turned into abandoned goods. Depending on the mentality of the god species, this old beast with many more years to go in her life wouldn't be resigned to die so easily.

For what cause would her death matter to her? For a dumb brute of a mate who picked a fight against an opponent with horrible offensive powers? For a sacred god who never outgrew to be his own god?

While Qilanxo hadn't really communicated all that much with her captors, the psychologists and exobiologists composed a detailed report of her personality. Ves patiently read through all the documents concerning her willingness to cooperate. He also browsed the documents related to the body structure of the sacred gods.

Compared to the wild gods, the growth of the sacred gods diverged despite essentially belonging to the same species. The main changes revolved around the miraculous god crystals, whom the scientists still puzzled over their use despite collecting a bunch of them from the carcasses of the dead sacred gods.

Very likely, the only way the engineers could figure out how to activate the god crystals and use them as replacement power generators was to gain Qilanxo's cooperation. Through some unknown procedure, nineteen god crystals rested against her hide, half of them buried into her flesh while the other half remained exposed to the air.

These god crystals allowed Qilanxo to call down an energy tornado and fill up her energy reservoirs to fuel her defensive powers. Maintaining her space barrier drained a large amount of energy, so much so that they could easily fuel the operation of the entire ground expedition for a day, if not more!

That didn't sound so impressive, but in fact this represented an incredible amount of energy. More than that, the sacred god made use of the energy

with unparalleled efficiency, wasting relatively low amounts of waste heat for all the energy she expended.

To Ves, everything about Qilanxo seemed to be a well-engineered sacred god. Even among ace mechs piloted by seasoned ace pilots who possessed comparable powers, Qilanxo ranked on the upper end of the scale.

The major problem right now that Qilanxo appeared to grieve for her fallen beast rider, her chosen. All the Vandals knew was that her human companion was a woman from their footage of the battle. They hadn't been able to figure out anything else as Qilanxo obviously couldn't talk.

The spy drones hovering in the outskirts of Samar also didn't really find out anything pertinent. The mortal citizens all kept a healthy distance from the sacred gods. Besides, with Pailanon in charge, no one dared to speak about worshipping the old gods anymore.

The lack of information concerning her former beast rider inconvenienced Ves in his new assignment. He'd been put in charge of the project meant to pair Qilanxo up with a new beast rider.

He had no clue where to start.

Fortunately, the Vandals assigned some random exobiologists and other experts to his project, though they appeared they would rather join the other, more interesting projects that studied the physiology of these god species. These chums got the short end of the stick.

Ves called the small group of experts together in a free room attached to the giant holding facility built around Qilanxo's imprisoned form. Many temporary labs had been set up as well to help Qilanxo recover and to study her living physique.

Compared to those large work teams, the project team led by Ves didn't amount to much, even though their work played a critical role in enhancing the strength of the Flagrant Swordmaidens.

"Alright, fellows, you all know why we are here." He began after a brief round of introductions. None of the experts impressed Ves that much. "Qilanxo is our first captive sacred god, and it's a waste to keep her as our prisoner when she can be so much more. The same defensive prowess that she used to shield her fellow sacred gods from the combined firepower of all of our mechs and cannons can be employed to protect our own assets in future battles. Having her on our side is almost the same thing as having an ace mech on our side!"

Equating Qilanxo to an ace mech immediately affected the experts around the table. Some of their eyes grew hot when they realized the magnitude of such an outcome.

With an entity comparable to an ace mech by their side, the ground forces would become a lot more assured of victory!

Still, getting there wouldn't be easy.

"At this moment, Qilanxo has not been willing to divulge too much information." Someone involved with communication reported. "While we've confirmed that Qilanxo is able to speak and understand the standard language, she isn't in the mood to communicate. As for the reason, you all know that already."

"Would it be callous of us if we push a new beast rider onto her? Maybe we need to give her more time to grieve."

"You're treating Qilanxo like a traumatized human. She's much older than us, and by all accounts her last beast rider isn't the first one she paired up with. I think the sacred god is a lot more resilient than you think."

Ves agreed with this sentiment. "Regardless how Qilanxo feels about taking on a new beast rider, we don't have the time to allow her to process her loss. She needs to get over with it and accept a new beast rider from us regardless of how much it affects her mood."

He couldn't take forever with this project. They needed someone close to Qilanxo so that the Flagrant Swordmaidens became more assured that she wouldn't act out against them. A sacred god without a beast rider would forever be a loose cannon who could turn against them at any moment.

They needed to develop a new rapport with Qilanxo and indoctrinate her into fighting on the behalf of the Flagrant Swordmaidens.

"Who will be her beast rider? A Vandal or a Swordmaiden?"

"A Vandal of course! It's wholly through our efforts that we managed to capture her alive and convert her for our use!"

"According to our studies concerning the sacred gods and their chosen, the pair must be of somewhat similar temperaments to provide the best fit. The older the sacred god, the less malleable and more formidable their minds become. I hate to say it, but many of our Vandals don't possess the required temperament and maturity to be a good partner for Qilanxo."

So far, every beast rider the Flagrant Vandals observed matched the gender of the sacred god they were paired with. There was definitely a reason behind this, and the most predominant one that the Vandals came up with was that the beast riders and the sacred gods couldn't be too different from each other.

"What are you saying?!" Another expert exploded. "We have plenty of female mech pilots who aren't pushovers!"

"Many of the Swordmaidens are much more formidable in terms of mental strength than our Vandal mech pilots. The model I've constructed shows that out of every mech pilot in the expedition, Commander Lydia shows the best fit

by far. Her skills, temperament, leadership ability, life experience and more all makes her the most prominent potential partner for Qilanxo."

Ves decided to intervene. "Obviously, the question on who to select as our beast rider has political implications. No matter who we chose, the balance of power will definitely shift."

"I don't see the problem. Why not pick a Vandal mech pilot and be done with it? We're not under the obligation to hand over our spoils to the Swordmaidens."

The cooperation between the Vandals and the Swordmaidens remained harmonious so far, but they only captured a single sacred god. This placed their alliance in an awkward position. How could they share something that couldn't be divided?

Or maybe they don't need to engage in this tug of war in the first place.

"A mech doesn't have to be the exclusive property of a single mech pilot. While this is normally the convention, there are times when there are more mechs than mech pilots." Ves pointed out.

The experts all fell silent.

"Is it even possible for a sacred god to be paired with two beast riders?"

"I don't see why that can't happen. It's just like piloting a mech, right?"

"It's different. A mech can't think for itself. Qilanxo is a sentient alien beast who can think for herself. From what we've observed so far, every sacred god only chooses one person to be their beast rider. While they have selected other people to be their chosen, that has only happened if their old beast riders died or became too old to be their partners."

"So it is a matter of preference?"

"We don't know. We'll have to sound out Qilanxo and see if she's willing to be paired with two different beast riders."

Ves nodded in approval. "Let's set this as our goal. Our mission won't be finished until we successfully pair Qilanxo with both a Vandal and a Swordmaiden mech pilot."

They began to discuss all the things that needed to happen to accomplish such a thing. Neither Ves or any other expert believed that it would be as simple as putting a mech pilot on Qilanxo's back and ordering her to connect their minds together.

"We need to communicate with Qilanxo and ease her into the idea of selecting two new chosen among our mech pilots."

"We don't know if it's safe for a mech pilot to interface with the mind of this formidable beast. We'll need to conduct a lot of safety experiments in order to get a handle on the risks."

"Would Qilanxo be offended if we tried to pair her up with one of the dwarves? Both the god species and the native humans possess heavily-altered brain structures. We need to see a man-beast connection up close in order to build a helmet or a machine that can mimic the capabilities of the native people."

A lot of different suggestions came together to form a simple plan where each expert pursued different research topics. There was much the Vandals didn't know about the sacred gods, so they couldn't help but perform extensive studies before they were willing to expose a mech pilot's mind to the much more formidable mind of an old and powerful beast.

Ves himself needed to become involved as well. For some reason, Ves didn't think he could build a cockpit on top of Qilanxo's back and get a mech pilot to interface with the sacred god in that way. He needed to work with both flesh

and machine to enable the man-beast connection to happen with their own mech pilots.

The risks were high and the chance of screwups might cause irreparable harm to the mech pilots hoping to interface with Qilanxo's mind.

Ves foresaw that he needed to stretch his limited knowledge of neural interface yet again and blaze a trail in the darkness and hope he reached his destination.

The challenge both intimidated and invigorated him. He felt as if this was what being a Senior Mech Designer was like. "No matter how difficult it is to accomplish their dreams, they stride forward with absolute confidence in their success."

#### **Chapter 824 Gods by Design**

This may be his first time leading a collaborative research project, but Ves possessed an ample amount of leadership experience. He didn't feel out of depth and the other experts had no problems complying with his orders as he asserted himself as the man in charge.

Most of the experts in his team knew what burden he shouldered and didn't wish to take his place.

If anything went wrong, all the blame would be laid at his feet.

On the other hand, if their project achieved success, Ves expected to earn most of the credit, with the other experts only able to remain on the sidelines due to their hesitation.

Every decision came at a cost.

As the experts dispersed to pursue their own research, Ves decided he wanted to get close to Qilanxo and try to interact with the beast.

As a mech designer, Ves always tried to gain an understanding of the essence of the mechs he worked with. Sometimes their designers created the mechs with a clear vision in mind. Other times, the designers didn't even know what their end product might look like and only stumbled on the final form by chance.

Ves considered the sacred gods to be products of engineering rather than nature. The reports from the Vandal experts made it abundantly clear that while they hadn't incorporated many foreign genes, they all changed critical aspects of their biology.

For all intents and purposes, the exobiologists from the Starlight Megalodon designed the god species for a very precise purpose. Not only that, but the god species also incorporated elements from mech design into their bodies.

"They are the result of a fusion between exobiology, genetic modification and mech design."

The god species were living, sentient mechs in the shape of giant lizards that thought for themselves and even possessed the powers of resonance in their bodies.

If elite pilots could be called gods, then these exobeasts might be akin to gods as well! The natives called them gods out of ignorance, but they were not entirely wrong to do so. Both the wild gods and the sacred gods possessed power far beyond the realm of mortal men and women.

When Ves received permission to approach Qilanxo, he calmly walked up to the large and ominous lizard. Qilanxo possessed a predominantly grey-blue coloring interspersed with red striped patterns. Her build absolutely surpassed that of a heavy mech, though compared to other sacred gods she was a little shorter from head to tail, though she made up for it in width.

What struck Ves the most was that his exposed head felt the stirring of the wind as the majestic beast breathed softly. Qilanxo appeared asleep at the moment. Her eyes closed with weariness as her deep, scorched wounds slowly regenerated with the assistance of the Vandal exobiologists and doctors.

Her recovery was still an on-going concern as her huge bulk needed to regenerate a lot of dead and burned flesh. She still suffered the consequences of surviving the devastating explosion that wracked her form and killed the other sacred gods.

As Ves came within twenty paces of the lizard's tooth-filled maw, he did not dare to approach any closer. A primal part of his mind rebelled at the thought of willingly coming close to this huge and dangerous beast that could snap his body in half despite wearing his C22 Earth Ant.

Those jaws looked strong enough to snap a light mech in half!

"Qilanxo, are you? My name is Vesk Larkinson. I'm a mech designer. That means that I'm in charge of all of those large metal human-like machines. These machines are piloted by humans called mech pilots. Would you like a mech pilot to become your new chosen? While it may not compensate for your loss, a new partner represents a new beginning. Both the Flagrant Vandals and Lydia's Swordmaidens would feel much more reassured of your cooperation if you accept one of us as your chosen."

He might as well be talking to a wall. Qilanxo kept her eyes closed and Ves didn't even know if she was really sleeping or simply didn't deign to hear the words of a mortal.

Ves didn't give up yet and started to ramble for five more minutes. He addressed many different topics such as where they came from, what was

beyond the vault of the stars, the greatness of mechs, the training mech pilots went through and more.

None of these topics triggered her interest. For all intents and purposes, she resembled a big dumb exobeast, even though she was anything but those creatures. Even the majestic hexapod kings back in Groening IV failed to measure up to a sacred god.

They thought. They surpassed their beastly instincts and gained a measure of sentience.

From what the exobiologists gathered about the god species, the wild gods free in the wild lacked this quality. Evidence continued to mount that the act of interfacing with a blessed or cursed human allowed the god species to develop their sentience.

In a way, these sacred gods possessed a symbiotic relationship with the native humans. To reach their full potential, they couldn't do without the help and cooperation of a human beast rider.

Wasn't that any different from the relationship between a mech and a mech pilot? Certainly, autonomous controlled by AIs mechs existed, but they could never match the ingenuity and intuition of a real mech pilot.

Let alone that, but AIs had never once achieved resonance with an expert mech. All of the rare and expensive materials incorporated into an expert mech wouldn't be able to bring any benefits so long the mech didn't come paired with a matching expert pilot!

This was where the god species differed from mechs. As living, thinking entities, they somehow managed to produce effects akin to resonance all on their own. Dr. Tillman and the other exobiologists believed that the unique circumstances of the planet played an essential role in this process.

The higher-dimensional particles released into the planet and the star system possessed a lot more properties than distorting the surrounding spacetime.

Minute amounts of these particles enter the bodies of the local wildlife and the largest creatures of them all accumulated a considerable amount of higher-dimensional energy or matter, though usually in a derived form.

Even Qilanxo possessed a huge murky crystal in the center of her brains according to the deep scans.

A sacred god like Qilanxo possessed an inestimable advantage over mechs in that they could take actions just fine without an accompanying human partner. For some reason though, the sacred gods still insisted on selecting people to be their chosen partners.

There must be a benefit involved somehow. Perhaps the sacred gods continually grew smarter over repeated interfacing. Perhaps they would be able to control their powers even better if paired with a talented potentate with great data processing capabilities.

These theories served to explain a sacred god's continued symbiosis with their beast rider.

An even more daring theory stated that the benefits didn't flow in a single direction. The beast rider enjoyed huge benefits as well.

The battle against Pairixan showed that despite throwing lethal poison and other dangerous at the humans riding atop the sacred gods, the beast riders withstood the toxic air as if someone merely let out a fart.

The long-ranged sensors definitely observed that the beast riders needed to breathe, yet their human bodies somehow experienced huge changes!

Their body quality even surpassed the body quality of the Swordmaidens, who combined rigorous training with extensive genetic modification to strengthen their close combat prowess beyond the level of ordinary humans.

Not even the exobiologists could completely explain how this could happen.

Once the beast rider project began their selection process to pair Qilanxo up with a couple of mech pilots, Ves predicted that they'd be overrun with applications!

Ves already anticipated a lot of headaches in the future.

"Well, that's in the future."

First, the beast rider project needed to gain Qilanxo's cooperation. Ves tried to talk to her for so long, but the creature didn't even deign to pay attention to him. Perhaps to Qilanxo, all mortals were as weak as ants.

Still, Ves possessed one more trick to see if he could elicit a reaction out of the big beast.

With exceeding care, Ves started to focus his Spirituality. He extended his sixth sense and tried to see if he could perceive anything from Qilanxo.

It was subtle, but Ves detected something from the beast. If mech pilots and expert pilots possessed flame-like souls that grew in size and became more physical as they grew stronger, the spiritual flame of the god beast was massive in comparison.

Yet while it was immensely large to the point of pressing down on his sixth sense, it was as if it didn't exist. He could barely perceive its might.

Was this a common feature among all sacred gods?

Qilanxo stirred. Ves hadn't been very subtle about extending his senses. He had brushed against her spirituality and affected it ever so slightly.

One of her man-sized eyelids swept open. A mesmerizingly large pupil focused squarely at Ves as if shooting out an invisible laser.

Ves felt a huge but weak wave of spirituality passing through his body. He hadn't managed to let loose his concentration in time, which meant the wave battered against his condensed spirit!

This elicited Qilanxo's interest, and she swept her other eye open as well. This sacred god had found out something very interesting about Ves!

It stretched its head forward ever so slightly, though her restraints kept her from moving too far. She sniffed the air and took in his scent, though rightfully speaking she predominantly smelled the materials of his custom armor.

"Qilanxo." Ves carefully spoke. "Are you awake?"

The creature stared at Ves with an inscrutable expression. It was like looking directly into the gaze of a dragon. Invisible waves of spirituality kept sweeping over the entire area like a murky sea about to be engulfed into a storm.

Her spiritual presence was massive, yet weak!

Ves repeated the words he spoke at the beginning. He introduced himself and shortly described what he sought to do. When he broached the topic of accepting a pair of new beast riders, Qilanxo let out a soft roar.

It was her first response! Ves became encouraged because Qilanxo definitely showed some interest this time, even if she didn't seem enthused.

"What do you think about acquiring some new human partners?"

Qilanxo let out an angry roar. The offer didn't make her happy.

Ves fell into a small dilemma at this point. As their prisoner, Ves could coerce Qilanxo into cooperating with the Flagrant Swordmaidens. Yet he was afraid that if he pushed it too far, the beast would simply go mad and go out in a final blazing glory.

He had to obtain Qilanxo's cooperation through other means. How, he didn't know yet. There was nothing the Flagrant Swordmaidens could really offer to her. Captain Byrd wouldn't approve of any concessions that murdered their side and unnecessarily empowered the beast.

To the Vandals, Qilanxo was a beast to be used, in the same way a mech was a tool used to for war. If their captive sacred god became more trouble than she was worth, then the Vandals weren't above executing her and be done with the fussy beast.

Her continued existence depended on her cooperation.

"Qilanxo. Don't be so soon to reject the offer yet. We will bring a lot of our mech pilots to you soon. Just take a look at them and see if there is anyone you like. We hope that you will pick two of them, one from each of our two forces. Do you agree with such a procedure?"

Qilanxo let out a huffing roar. Perhaps that was her version of saying 'whatever'. It was better than an angry roar, though, so Ves considered it a success. He achieved at least one of his goals, even if the sacred god only begrudgingly agreed to his request.

### **Chapter 825 Beast Rider Matchmaking**

Word began to spread of the beast rider project's selection process.

Two-thirds of all female mech pilots were eligible to take part in this selection process! The only ones who didn't receive permission were those piloting essential mechs such as the Akkara heavy mechs and those who served critical roles such as the mech officers.

Due to the considerable risks and dangers involved with attempting to interface the mind of a mech pilot with the mind of an exobeast, Captain Byrd and Commander Lydia only agreed to let their more expendable mech pilots become Qilanxo's partners.

Ves wanted to proceed with the selection process soon because he figured that letting Qilanxo grow close to her new partners would help make her more cooperative to the Flagrant Swordmaidens.

If she showed less animosity and more willingness to cooperate, then the beast rider project could proceed with the difficult steps of building some kind of hybrid neural interface to allow a baseline human mech pilot to mimic the remote interfacing abilities of the blessed and cursed people.

Right now, a normal human mech pilot wouldn't be able to connect with Qilanxo's biological neural interface inside her massive head.

For several reasons, the Vandals declined to let Venerable Xie join the tryouts.

The Pale Dancer may not be very useful against the sacred gods, but it was absolutely deadly against enemy mechs. The ground expedition couldn't afford to lose the strength of this expert mech because it served as one of their sharpest offensive tools.

After all, according to Ves, since the sacred gods called up most of their resonance powers on their own, it shouldn't be entirely essential if their beast riders were the equivalent of expert pilots.

"Besides, Venerable Xie is a man. What does he know of motherhood and other female concerns?" Ves smirked.

Setting up a rotation of tryouts where every mech pilot received one minute to convince Qilanxo to select them required a bit of preparation work.

While the project team worked together with the planners to schedule the entire event, Ves took care of some other business in the meantime. He met up with Talkative Jimmy again at one of the mess halls. As they ate their meals, they began to engage in a casual discussion again.

Ves deliberately sought out to make their gatherings a regular occasion. Talkative Jimmy was an extremely well-connected Vandal. Sometimes, Ves even suspected him to be a member of Flashlight, though he could have just been what he appeared to be on the surface, a good-for-nothing whose only hobby was to gossip.

In exchange for hearing tidbits of information that he normally wouldn't have been able to find out elsewhere, Ves reciprocated in turn by telling some of his own stories. He found it to be a useful way to shape the opinions of Talkative Jimmy's audience.

Right now, Talkative Jimmy expressed a lot of interest in the beast rider selection process! As the person in charge, no one knew about the selection process more than Ves himself, so Jimmy eagerly asked his questions.

"Is it true that the selection process is limited to women?"

"Yes. I think it should be obvious why. This isn't an unthinking mech we are talking about. Qilanxo is a female of her species and it wouldn't be appropriate to pair her up with a man."

"Only two mech pilots are allowed to become her beast riders, right? What do they have to look out for? How can the women who are about to try their luck increase their odds of success?"

This was a difficult question, as it ultimately depended on the whims of a thinking beast. His project team did manage to come up with a list of factors that might make the beast take note.

"It helps to understand her species first. The exobiologists compiled a basic book on the properties and life cycle of the god species. Mech pilots ought to be familiar with the basics, such as our admittedly unproven theory that the personalities of the sacred gods take after their previous beast riders.

Therefore, those with the personality or thinking pattern of former chosen will fare best."

Qilanxo's previous chosen likely enjoyed a very high status in Samar. Being chosen by the gods directly elevated them to the top of the ancient city's ruling structure. A good fit for Qilanxo therefore needed to be confident, assertive, imperious and be a leader.

This was also why the project team considered Commander Lydia to be an extremely fitting beast rider for Qilanxo. Ves mentally sighed in relief that her responsibilities prevented her from trying out.

As Ves briefly explained these qualities, Talkative Jimmy frowned.

"That sounds really difficult to fulfill. Only our mech officers will stand a chance of being selected."

"We're starting with the rank-and-file first. We don't want to risk anyone too important if we can help it. We'll only be trodding out our officers if no one else is to Qilanxo's liking."

"Is there nothing else than can help?"

"Well, the act of interfacing with an alien exobeast is a very different experience from interfacing with the processors and operating system of a mech." Ves casually explained. "Since we are kind of new at this, we don't expect to get it working quickly. Things might go wrong, or incompatibilities might arise. In these cases, possessing a strong mind that can take a lot of pressure will be helpful in enduring the strain. Those who don't last long enough in the mental resilience training sessions are too weak in Qilanxo's eyes."

This was another unproven theory he wanted to throw out into the rumor mill. The Vandals and Swordmaidens resumed their training sessions after the Vandals captured some new dwarves from the surrounding tribes to conduct

the sessions with. However, far too few Vandal mech pilots lasted long enough to match the performance of the much more impressive Swordmaidens.

Ves did not want Qilanxo to favor her Swordmaiden beast rider over her Vandal beast rider. Anyone she selected from the pool of female Vandal mech pilots better be strong enough to maintain her interest.

After answering a few smaller questions about the selection process, Ves decided to ask some questions on his own. "What is Venerable Xie up to these days?"

"Same old stuff." Jimmy shrugged. "He accepted a couple more mech pilots and shored up their training. According to what I heard, their performance drastically shot up during the recent training drills."

Expert pilots possessed a much deeper understanding and mastery of piloting skills than advanced pilots. Their skills had reached a level beyond the reach of mortals. Their greater height allowed them to spot the flaws in the piloting abilities of ordinary mech pilots and offer succinct suggestions for them to improve.

In fact, getting tutored by an expert pilot was one of the guaranteed ways to increase a mech pilot's chances of advancing to experts themselves one day!

This was because the guidance of an expert pilot helped shore up their weaknesses and strengthen their foundation. While this kind of attention didn't guarantee that mech pilots would be able to advance, it at least put them one step ahead of the rest who mostly needed to rely on themselves or guidance from flawed, mortal instructors.

All the active and retired expert pilots in the Larkinson family also helped train the next generation for that reason. This unbroken chain of older expert pilots

guiding the younger ones in the family heavily contributed to the emergence of newer expert pilots among the Larkinsons.

This was the true strength of an unofficial military dynasty!

Family always benefited first from the generosity of an expert pilot!

And now, Venerable Xie generously offered his services to random low-ranking Vandal mech pilots without much reserve. Ves couldn't help but suspect greater motives in the expert pilot's charity.

"I hope the men don't forget who their bosses are. Venerable Xie is still a foreigner."

Ves couldn't do much more than give out a lame warning. The temptation of receiving personal tutoring from an expert pilot was simply too great to resist.

He still hadn't decided how to deal with the expert pilot. He thought about tweaking his neural interface again, but that would have tripped up some alarms. Venerable Xie wouldn't fail to miss a change.

Besides, Ves himself had no clue how to modify the neural interface to overcome the expert pilot's considerable mental defenses.

Still, an expert pilot only expressed their true strength when piloting an active mech. If Ves had access to the Pale Dancer, he could think of hundreds of ways to sabotage the expert mech to such an extent as to force it to shut down. That would take away the expert pilot's sharpest weapon.

Though he'd still be able to hijack any other mech, at least he wouldn't be an unbeatable demigod anymore.

Talkative Jimmy looked at Ves with a shine in his eyes. While Ves never asked too much about Venerable Xie, his insistence on receiving a status update on the expert pilot didn't go unnoticed. Sometimes, an unspoken message said much more than a spoken one.

"By the way." Jimmy said. "The mech technicians are beginning to boil over. They're not very satisfied with Ketis looming over their shoulders. I think the chief technicians even went behind your back and complained to Captain Byrd."

Ves never heard of this. "Did anything come out of that meeting?"

"Nothing happened, so I guess not. The chief technicians hate your Swordmaiden guest designer though. They don't believe she has any business telling them what to do. At least when you were still around, you fixed up their messes perfectly. They don't think that lass or any other mech designer that's available can equal your skill."

Ves sighed in exasperation. "I'm busy with holding the selection process and trying to make it possible for our beast riders to interface with Qilanxo. I don't have the time to babysit the mech technicians. Captain Byrd knows that too, so that's probably the reason why she hasn't made a move. If you ever see one of the mech technicians or their chiefs, tell them that they need to learn how to fix their own messes instead of crying to mommy all the time."

"The techs won't like that. Are you sure you want them to hear you talk about them like that?"

"I'm sure."

"It's your funeral."

He believed that over time, Ketis would fit in better in her new role as supervisor. Only a short time had passed and she still needed to solve a lot more problems before she fully adjusted to this line of work.

This was also why Ves dared to speak dismissively about their complaints.

Their little talk quickly came to an end after they finished their meal. Talkative Jimmy had a lot more people to gossip with and Ves needed to get back to work.

One day later, the selection process commenced. Over the course of a standard day, off-duty mech pilots showed up at a specific time and stepped forward to Qilanxo.

This time, a lot more experts watched by the side behind an array of terminals and control panels. They set up several scanners and sensors that measured the mech pilot and Qilanxo's life signs such as their breathing rhythms, heart beats, body temperature and more.

Not a lot of experts dared to come close enough to be within biting range of the sacred god, but Ves courageously stood close. He looked at a clock set up nearby and called up the next female mech pilot.

"You're up!"

The Vandal mech pilot walked forward with some signs of trepidation. Despite the stories that circulated from Jimmy's mouth, she failed to muster up a confident stance in front of the intimidating lizard.

Qilanxo opened her eyes and stared straight at the poor mech pilot, causing her to stutter backwards in fright.

The exobeast didn't look impressed. She closed her giant eyes right after. Despite the mech pilot's belated attempts at talking to Qilanxo, the lofty sacred god paid no attention to someone so unworthy.

"Your minute is up. Get off the field." Ves ruthlessly called.

Inwardly, he sighed. They already went through twenty female Vandal mech pilots and Qilanxo never spared more than a few seconds of her attention to each.

## Chapter 826 Qualities of a Beast Rider

Ves watched on as many different mech pilots stepped up to be judged by Qilanxo. The sacred god regained some of her imperiousness the last few days. No longer did she radiate the impression of a defeated, wounded beast. Instead, she gave people the impression that she was a queen among beasts, a mighty god with the power to look down on mortals like Ves and other humans.

Various female Vandal mech pilots stepped up to talk or convince Qilanxo to pick them as her beast rider. Some found the experience to be daunting, to the point where their knees started to shake in their piloting suits.

Others exhibited the senseless courage of a calf unafraid of the tiger. Ves looked deeply into their eyes and saw that they didn't look at Qilanxo with respect.

As a sacred god defeated by a single combined explosion, her defeat had been ignoble and without honor.

One might say that she fell too easily against the might of the Vandals.

Yet a sacred god was still a sacred god. Ves always considered her as an anthropomorphized form of an ace mech. To a mech designer, ace mechs were holy machines and masterpieces of mech engineering.

Therefore, a mech pilot that saw Qilanxo as a tool and a vehicle of their own ascension wouldn't be a good partner for her! The partnership between the sacred god and her rider at least had to contain mutual respect.

"Your minute is up. Get out." Ves spoke to the latest failed mech pilot.

These female mech pilots mostly attempted to try their luck. They lacked confidence in themselves, and they also possessed a couple of bad habits, the foremost among them was that they didn't truly care about the mechs they

piloted. Ves noticed that those who followed this pattern of behavior extended it to their approach of Qilanxo.

Ves quietly shook his head. "How can mech pilots be so careless about the tools they stake their lives upon?"

Through his experience in servicing and repairing the mechs of Walter's Whalers and the Flagrant Vandals, he gradually came to know that a portion of mech pilots didn't treat their mechs with the care and attention they ought to deserve.

Even though the mech academies constantly espouse on this point, those who graduate to become mech pilots don't always stick to those lessons.

"They're not responsible for the condition of the mechs at the end of the day. If they break something, the mech technicians will clean up their messes."

A mech pilot's training encompassed so many subjects that took more than a couple of lifetimes to master that they didn't have time to appreciate the mechanics behind mechs. They were purely consumers of mechs.

As for maintaining them? That was left to the mech technicians and mech designers. No matter how many times the sloppy mech pilots slipped up, the techs behind the scenes always came forward to wipe their butts.

Unfortunately, this mentality of putting the mech pilot before the mech backfired in their attempts to rouse Qilanxo's interest.

A mech was an unthinking object despite its considerable data processing capabilities, and would never react if a mech pilot put it through considerable abuse.

A sacred god differed from a mech in that they could think! Qilanxo had her own feelings and thoughts. Not only did her beast riders need to show her the respect that she earned, they also had to be compatible.

Looking at all the mech pilots that strode forth, Ves found himself mentally shaking his head as he studied their temperament. From their body language and expressions alone, he could instantly tell that Qilanxo would never agree to partner up with these kind of mech pilots.

It had always been the mech pilot or their superiors choosing which mechs they should pilot. Even expert pilots couldn't escape this fate as the mech designer in charge of developing their expert mechs mainly adhered to their own preferences and design philosophy when tailoring them to their customers.

Right now this rule had been turned upside down, and too many mech pilots failed to adjust their mentality!

"Maybe I should have said more words to Jimmy."

Those who did seem to make a serious attempt at appealing to Qilanxo didn't do so with their true personalities. Their facetious attitudes and disingenuous interactions repelled both Ves and Qilanxo.

It was strange for him to be able to be so insightful. His current level of observation shouldn't have been so good.

Why did he feel as if he and Qilanxo looked at the mech pilots in the same way?

"Your time is over. Next!"

He shouldn't get distracted by irrelevant thoughts. Right now, the Vandals and Swordmaidens needed to present at least one decent mech pilot each that might work well with Qilanxo.

Unfortunately, his wish didn't come true. By the time that all of the eligible Vandal mech pilots passed through the selection process, Qilanxo hadn't

seen fit to select a single one of them. They all possessed a deficiency or two that disqualified them in her eyes.

"Maybe the Swordmaidens will be better."

Ves still lamented about the awful quality of the Vandal mech pilots. He figured that anyone half-decent already promoted to the officer level.

The Swordmaiden mech pilots that stepped up came in much greater quantity, as Lydia's Swordmaidens essentially consisted entirely of female mech pilots. In a profession skewed towards men, this gave the pirate outfit a lot more chances to succeed.

"Step forward and make your appeals. You have one minute, just like the Vandals. If you haven't earned Qilanxo's interest in that time, you'll never be able to it no matter how much time is allotted to you."

The first Swordmaiden strode forward with confidence. Ves could have read a brief profile of her with the datapad in his grasp, but his unusually perceptive eyes already took in her personality.

Firm. Unyielding. Disciplined. Hard-working. Courageous.

Every Swordmaiden mech pilot possessed these traits. As women who survived a harsh elite training regime, they had all been ingrained with solid values from their trainers. The martial culture of the Swordmaidens also became ingrained within their bones.

Whenever the Vandals encountered a Swordmaiden mech pilot, they unconsciously felt as if they met a warrior to the core. They lived and breathed combat in their every waking moment!

Yet... the indoctrination they went through also molded them into a single form. A training regime meant to produce the perfect warrior stripped out many parts of their individuality that didn't contribute to their combat strength.

These Swordmaidens were strong. Yet what they gained in strength, they lost in other areas.

Naturally, the Swordmaidens showed no awareness of the traits they lost. Perhaps half the Swordmaidens didn't possess any hobbies other than practicing their piloting and swordsmanship skills.

That was far too one-dimensional in the eyes of Ves. A worthy partner for Qilanxo had to be more than a simple brute who only knew how to fight and train!

"Time is up. Get off the stage."

Some of the Swordmaidens couldn't believe that they failed in attracting Qilanxo's interest. They were so confident of their chances and thought themselves so highly that they couldn't conceive of a reason why the big beast only opened its eyelids for a few seconds before shutting them off.

When the next one stepped up, this one appeared a bit more different. This Swordmaiden gazed at Qilanxo as if she was itching to draw out her greatsword for a duel.

A hunter. This Swordmaiden hunted exobeasts for a hobby, so much so that she couldn't disassociate Qilanxo as one of her many preys.

Ves could already tell that Qilanxo wouldn't be pleased with partnering up with a human who saw her as an animal to be butchered during a ritual hunt.

"One minute is up. Make way for the next mech pilot."

All the subsequent Swordmaiden mech pilots that strode up fell into a limited set of boxes. The Swordmaidens truly had much to be proud of, but a great mech pilot didn't necessarily make for a great beast rider.

A mech couldn't think for itself in ordinary circumstances. An exobeast was wholly different.

If only the Swordmaidens weren't so stiff, then they'd be able to present a much more attractive to Qilanxo.

"That's enough time. Best let your fellow sisters have a try."

"I refuse!" One of the Swordmaidens surprisingly burst out. "I'm not afraid of this big lizard! I've eaten plenty of god meat! This beast needs to be taught a lesson!"

Ves threw his mind out of his idle speculations and looked at the Swordmaiden mech pilot with a critical expression. "Qilanxo doesn't care. You better step away before she gets mad. I'm not responsible for what happens if you do something to provoke the sacred god."

"Who's side are you on?!"

"I'm trying to save your life! This is a sacred god you're challenging? Are you insane?!"

"Fear is an impediment!" The Swordmaiden cried and unsheathed her greatsword from her floating scabbard. "If talking doesn't work, then have a taste of my sword!"

As much as Ves wanted to see this arrogant Swordmaiden getting munched between Qilanxo's jaws, the Flagrant Swordmaidens couldn't afford to lose a mech pilot. Everyone of them was precious and if they died, they should at least perish on the battlefield.

As the Swordmaiden idiotically stepped forward with her menacing sword raised upright, Ves simply drew out his backup laser pistol and fired on the deck just before her feet.

"Halt! Go no further! You don't know what you're doing. I'm warning you, don't come closer."

As Ves stared straight into the Swordmaiden's eyes, he didn't back down at all. Even though the mech pilot killed many beasts and men throughout her time with the Swordmaidens, the steel that Ves displayed slightly took her aback.

This mech designer didn't take no for an answer!

Through his unrelenting stare, the Swordmaiden couldn't decide whether to continue forward or back off. Swordmaidens generally never backed off when challenged. Even if they lost, they needed to show their dignity!

Just as the Swordmaiden took a step forward, the lazy excuses of security officers who kept the crowd in line finally handled the situation. One of them simply fired the electrorod mounted on his shoulder armor, zapping the recalcitrant pirate with a paralyzing dose of electricity.

Her body instantly dropped!

If she wore something better than a piloting suit and armed herself with something other than a sword, then she might have been able to deal some actual damage.

Just like with mechs, a sword meant nothing if the wielder didn't possess any resilience against ranged attacks.

After the Swordmaidens witnessed one of their sister taken out so ignobly, the remainder of the Swordmaiden mech pilots behaved honestly.

Sadly, none of the Swordmaiden mech pilots managed to rouse Qilanxo's interest. Each of them possessed the same kind of faults. Too focused on their warrior training. Too martially minded. Too contemptuous of exobeasts. Too aggressive and muscle-brained.

Ves expected better from the Swordmaidens. He thought that at least a portion of them would have been a shoe-in for partnering up with Qilanxo. Yet he realized that he only based his expectations on impressions from afar.

What the Swordmaidens showed in public in the view of the Vandals only represented a portion of their inner qualities.

"No more?"

"There are no further Swordmaiden mech pilots on the schedule."

The selection process failed. Out of hundreds of female mech pilots, not a single one of them appealed to Qilanxo.

Ves frowned deeply. Was Qilanxo too picky? Did she even put some serious effort into evaluating the mech pilots, or did she refuse to engage them because they were the enemy?

From what Ves observed of the mech pilots that stepped forth, none of them deserved a second chance. Repeating this selection process tomorrow wouldn't yield a different result.

The beast rider project needed to let loose some of their restrictions and expand their pool of viable beast riders.

"We'll have to consider the officers." He concluded helplessly.

### **Chapter 827 The Two Champions**

The selection process ended without a single pick! The beast rider project received a lot of criticism. Why didn't the mech pilots receive more time to make their case? Why couldn't they prod Qilanxo into making up her mind?

Some even cursed Qilanxo directly for being an uncooperative beast. Was she even sentient, or did all of the eggheads overestimate her intelligence?

The giant chamber built around Qilanxo seemed much emptier now that he mech pilots and most of the researcher left. The few people around mainly

consisted of exobiologists in charge of studying Qilanxo's body properties and helping her heal her wounds.

While grievous, her wounds made remarkable strides in recovering. Much of her recovery came through her own body's remarkable capacity for recovery.

Any god species underwent numerous battles for dominance and survival as they grew for hundreds of years. If they couldn't recover from a difficult battle, then none of the god species would have been able to make it past a hundred years.

The most the Vandal exobiologists accomplished at this stage was to accelerate her healing by a small amount. They treated infections, cut out diseased portions of flesh and treated irradiated portions with antirad treatments.

The more Qilanxo improved in health, the less irritable she became. She remained awake for quite a bit longer, though she usually spent her time staring at the walls and the humans buzzing about her giant form.

"I'm sorry none of our mech pilots appealed to you. I didn't expect their quality to be so bad." He apologized to Qilanxo. He felt no apprehension at talking to a formidable sacred god. Instead, he felt just as exasperated. "I'll find better candidates for you. There are better Vandals and Swordmaidens among us. You don't have to be lonely for long."

Qilanxo released a soft roar in response. Despite the unintelligible nature of the roar, Ves made an educated guess about the meaning behind the sound.

"Don't be like that. Commander Lydia and Captain Byrd won't feel reassured if you are left without partners who can understand what is going on in your mind. We'll chop you up for god meat hamburgers if you remain too stubborn, you know."

This time, Qilanxo released an aggressive roar at Ves. It came so ferociously that Ves almost bowled over due to the wind and the awful smell released from her maw. Some of the researchers even became alarmed, thinking that the exobeast might snap from some provocation.

"Nothing's wrong, guys! Go back to work!" Ves called back to the gawking onlookers. He ignored their attention and turned back to the sacred god. "As for you, don't give me that attitude. I know that sacred gods like you are used to doing what you want, but you're not in an ancient city anymore. We come from across the stars, and we descended on this world to complete a very arduous mission. Whether we manage to gain your cooperation or not isn't as vital as you think."

He attempted to give Qilanxo some perspective. If she remained stubborn to her exacting ways and kept refusing the mech pilots they served up, then her usefulness came to an end. No matter how much her defensive powers assisted the Vandals, if the Flagrant Swordmaidens couldn't control her, then they might be inviting disaster upon themselves.

For example, Qilanxo merely had to retract her space barrier at a critical moment in order to let those sheltering underneath take the brunt of enemy fire.

While pairing her up with a couple of beast riders wouldn't prevent this problem, it at least allowed the humans to keep tabs the sacred god.

Ves found it to be a rather novel experience. It was as if the Flagrant Swordmaidens got their hands on an amazingly powerful mech, but feared being led to their doom its decisions and actions.

A mech should always benefit their owners! Even though Ves hadn't entirely followed this basic principle, he still carved it in his heart. At least in ordinary circumstances, a mech should never be a liability or a double-edged sword.

After some time, Qilanxo released a reluctant-sounded roar.

"I'm glad you came to your senses. For better or worse, your time with Samar is over. Your service with the Vandals and the Swordmaidens is just beginning. What happened in the past is over and done. Rather than keep lamenting on what you lost, try and look forward and think of the future. As long as you prove to be cooperative and helpful to us, it's not out of the question for us to strengthen you. We've recovered a lot of god crystals, you know. Perhaps our exobiologists figure out how to embed additional ones into your hide."

The amount of god crystals a sacred god incorporated into its body was a direct marker of their strength and status. Those with the highest number of crystals could store up much more energy and dominate over the lessers endowed with fewer crystals.

If Ves spoke the truth, then Qilanxo might be able to rise from the ashes from her defeat! She quickly let out an enthusiastic roar.

"That's the spirit." Ves smiled. "We're not all that bad. If your mate hadn't decided to attack us, then we wouldn't have been forced to defend ourselves. We initially approached the ancient city of Samar because we wanted to trade. There's no reason why we can't make a different transaction between ourselves."

Qilanxo responded with a neutral-sounding roar.

Ves felt as if he came to a verbal accord with Qilanxo.

"Well, I'll go off and fetch your candidates. I already have the people in mind.

He exited the chamber with firm destinations in mind. While he still remained in this strangely perceptive state, he wanted to approach the possible candidates instead of letting them come to Qilanxo. They'd only be wasting their time if they brought her more unworthy mech pilots.

Due to the distance, Ves had to ride a fast transport back to the camp. Once there, he accessed the records and found the location of the first mech pilot in mind. He went through the camp and came to what looked like a bar.

Ignoring the revelry and chatter, Ves strode across the drinking men and women and came across his target.

"Captain Orfan?"

"Huh? Ves? Whadda you want?"

"Do you want to become a beast rider?"

It took her three seconds to process the request.

"Aren't mech officers supposed to be barred from trying?"

"Qilanxo is pickier than we thought. None of the mech pilots shown so far are worthy in her eyes. Do you think you can do better?"

"Heck yea! I'm one of the best mech pilots in the Vandals!"

He knew it didn't take much convincing to gain Captain Orfan's cooperation. As he looked at her tipsy form, he initially didn't think she qualified.

However, despite her faults, she was a supremely confident mech pilot who possessed an actual personality as opposed to the rigid cookie-cutter Swordmaidens.

As someone who made it to the rank of captain, she also possessed a lot of leadership experience, and while Ves wouldn't call her a good leader by any means, at least she possessed the minimum chops to be regarded as one. In any case, many Vandals looked up to her, making her used to the attention she received.

The final criteria that made her worthy in his eyes was that she had actually dueled a sacred god and even won. Having faced a sacred god in battle,

Captain Orfan gained a unique appreciation of the beasts, and knew first-hand how powerful and dangerous they might be. Yet the duel had also taught her that they could be defeated as long as she was strong enough.

Once he gained her agreement, Ves pulled her out of the bar and crossed over to the Swordmaiden side of the camp. After a round of asking for directions, they came to one of the mech stables and found Lieutenant Dise watching over her swordsman mech.

The same reasons that made Captain Orfan somewhat suitable also applied to Lieutenant Dise of the Swordmaiden. More than the Vandal mech captain, Dise appreciated the power of the sacred gods the most.

The only complication with regards to Lieutenant Dise was that she was one of those exobeast hunting fanatics among the Swordmaidens.

Ves hoped that her quick defeat at the hands of Hokaz, the Tyrant of the Wastes, instilled her with enough humility to avoid regarding Qilanxo as prey.

"Lieutenant Dise, I've come to extend an invitation to you. Would you like the opportunity to ride a beast?"

"I'm in." She replied without hesitation.

Ves didn't need to hear anything else. Every mech pilot dreamed of riding atop a majestic beast like Qilanxo.

He brought the two officers back to a fast transport that conveyed them to the holding chamber. During the trip, he briefed the mech officers on their conduct. He knew what Qilanxo looked out for, and freely shared them to the two in order to maximize their chances of success.

"Qilanxo wants partners who respect her and even fear her a little. That fear should not be strong to the point of paralyzing you. She wants to maintain a relationship of mutual respect, but with her as the senior partner and you two

as the juniors. Don't regard her as a prisoner or a beast to be hunted. Do the two of you understand?"

"I understand." Dise said. She seemed to be supremely confident in herself and didn't feel the need to ask for tips.

Captain Orfan seemed a little less secure now that she sobered up a bit. "I don't know if I'm a good fit for the big girl. What if she doesn't like me?"

"If she doesn't like you, then she doesn't like you. Just remain confident and don't pretend you are someone you are not. She's as old as your grandmother's grandmother, and she's seen a lot of humans in her lifetime. There is nothing that can stay hidden in her view, so don't wrack your brains over it. Be yourself and hope for the best."

Once the fast transport arrived at the chamber, Ves led Dise and Orfan through the security checks before they strode inside.

The majestic form of Qilanxo greeted him once again. No matter how many times he saw her body, he kept thinking back on how she radiated power like a sleeping dragon. This feeling only increased after she began to recover from her wounds.

Even the two mech officers he brought looked impressed. The closer they approached beast, the more they became affected by her divine aura.

Qilanxo opened up her eyes and seared her gaze towards the two mech officers.

To their credit, neither of them flinched. Both possessed undaunting courage and both faced sacred gods before.

"Remember. Be respectful and be yourself, in that order."

The final reminder served to suppress their sense of superiority that threatened to crop up in response to the sacred god's challenging gaze.

They needed to bow their heads a little instead of trying to outcompete the sacred god in a dominance game they were destined to lose.

After they reached close enough, Ves walked towards the side while the two mech officers tried to figure out what they should do.

"Hey Qilanxo. I heard you need some company." Captain Orfan began.

She began to run her mouth as if she was chatting with one of her comrades at the bar. Strangely enough, Qilanxo appreciated Orfan's candor. There was something genuine and unpossessed about her conduct.

Ves did not see the usual rejection in Qilanxo's eyes. Evidently, his perception steered him true.

"That's enough, captain. Let Lieutenant Dise have her turn."

When Lieutenant Dise stepped up, she acted with a little more restraint than she normally behaved. She began to regale some of the tales of her most thrilling hunts.

The exact details didn't matter to Qilanxo. What she truly cared about was Dise's courage in facing many different beasts in battle.

Yet again, Qilanxo showed interest.

Both of the mech pilots that Ves had brought had accomplished the one thing that hundreds of other mech pilots failed to do. They captured the sacred god's interest!

### Chapter 828 Connected

After half an hour of presenting themselves, Captain Orfan of the Vandals Lieutenant Dise of the Swordmaidens both elicited a couple of minor roars from the giant form of Qilanxo.

While the roars didn't sound impressive, the mere fact that both of them managed to hold Qilanxo's interest already served as an encouraging sign.

"What do you think, Qilanxo?" He asked her directly. "Do you find these two worthy enough to allow them to partner up with you?"

She let out an ambiguous-sounding roar. Both Orfan and Dise frowned as they couldn't interpret the sound. Even Dise, an experienced beast hunter, couldn't interpret the meaning behind the roar.

Every exobeast was a completely different alien species who evolved on separate planets. Despite sharing the same label, they differed vastly in traits, though they also had a lot of things in common due to convergent evolution.

In Dise's experience, the sacred gods of Aeon Corona VII possessed a thunderous, warbling roar that unsettled her every time she heard it at close proximity. Her entire bones shook at the low, guttural vibrations.

It made her feel small and weak, yet it stirred her battle intent as well. She tried her best to repress those desires, keeping the warnings issued by Ves in mind.

"Qilanxo isn't displeased with the two of you." Ves interpreted for the sacred god. "That doesn't mean the two of you pass as of yet, but out of every mech pilot in our midst, you two stand the highest chance of getting accepted."

"So what now, kid?"

"The two of you are still strangers to Qilanxo. You need to spend some time with her and continue talking to her. Let her know you better so she has a deeper understanding of who you are. Treat it as a relationship and invest your emotions into building it up. As long as you are sincere, I'm sure Qilanxo will come to accept you as her partner."

Orfan and Dise looked disappointed that they hadn't been able to convince Qilanxo to accept them right on the spot, but then they reminded themselves that others received a straightforward rejection.

Only the two of them received the opportunity to spend more time with the sacred god!

Captain Orfan quickly frowned after she thought of something. "I have a lot of duties. I don't think Captain Byrd will be pleased if I'm pulled away from leading my mech company."

Lieutenant Dise shared the same concerns as well, though to a lesser degree.

"Well, it's either you two, or no one." Ves shrugged. "I'll bring it up to Captain Byrd and Commander Lydia. I think assigning you from your old posts to allow you to become Qilanxo's beast rider is a lot more attractive than leaving her unattended."

After sending the two officers off, Ves activated his comm and contacted both Commander Lydia and Captain Byrd in a remote conference call. He briefly summarized how the selection process proceeded.

While Lydia remained calm, Captain Byrd looked irked. "This isn't what you initially promised. We agreed that one of our low-ranking mech pilots should be in contention."

"Captain, I can't help it if Qilanxo isn't willing to give them the time of her day." Ves shrugged. "She's not a mech that willingly lets everyone who enters her cockpit pilot her like a puppet. She only accepts those who are worthy of the honor to bond with her. As a proud sacred god and and second strongest of her old pantheon, do you really think she'd be content with accepting an average mech pilot?"

"Still, there are better choices than Captain Orfan..."

Did Byrd dislike the fact that Orfan scored such a significant opportunity? It was no secret that the two Vandal mech captains disliked each other.

The chance of becoming a beast rider was an extremely unique opportunity. If Captain Byrd managed to win Qilanxo's approval, then she'd be able to add this to her record and enhance her stature even after she retired!

Even if the Mech Corps classified everything that happened on Aeon Corona VII, she still had her memories to inflate her ego.

And if some of the theories that Ves and the exobiologists had come up with were true, then Captain Orfan might experience some drastic improvements in her physique and piloting skill.

Just as the sacred god changed under the influence of their beast rider, so did the beast rider change under the influence of the sacred god!

Therefore, what Ves had done under his own initiative practically boosted Captain Orfan in every way imaginable.

"Look, ma'am, none of the other mech officers with the Vandals and the Swordmaidens have ever dueled a sacred god in a one-on-one duel. That alone accords them a critical measure of respect and recognition from Qilanxo. Mortals who challenged the sacred gods and lived are the only humans that aren't forgettable in Qilanxo's eyes. Unless you want to go off to Samar and challenge Pailanon and his subordinates for another set of duels, Captain Orfan is all you have among the Vandals."

Commander Lydia nodded her head. As someone deeply steeped in the warrior culture, she instinctively understood Qilanxo's lofty position. "Captain Byrd, any success is to be celebrated. When I heard how my Swordmaidens failed the initial selection process, I became concerned about what we should do about the beast. Now that we found a pair of compatible riders, we should be grateful that we don't have to consider less palatable alternatives."

All the other options were worse, so Captain Byrd could only surrender to the circumstances.

"Proceed with attempting to get those two accustomed to directing Qilanxo what to do. We are almost finished with repairs. Within a week, we will begin to move. The exobiologists believe she's capable of moving by then, so make sure our newly-designated beast riders gain sufficient control over the beast to follow our instructions."

"Will do, captain."

Qilanxo let out a soft but angry roar once the call ended. Ves conducted his call within earshot of the sacred god and she must have noticed Captain Byrd's dismissive attitude.

Ves turned to the sacred god. "I don't want to lie to you. There are people among us who want to make use of you. They also happen to be in charge. For the time being, you are under our care, and that means you only get to live as long as you are useful and controllable in their eyes."

Qilanxo let out a much louder roar now, so much so that Ves was forced to take a step backwards. He held no fear, though. He understood that the cry contained no threat to him. It was simply an expression of helplessness in the face of circumstances beyond her control.

Ves was very familiar with this sensation.

"I know that it pisses you off, but we're not interested in keeping you captive forever. For one thing, our ground forces eventually have to leave this planet and go back to the stars where we came from. It's too difficult to lift up something as heavy as you into the stars, so we'll probably let you go free as long as you are well-behaved. At that point, you can go do your own thing."

A questioning roar escaped from Qilanxo's maw. It was as if she doubted his words.

"I am absolutely speaking the truth!" He spoke emphatically, and he really meant it this time. "We aren't like the blessed people who worship you like

sheep. Unlike them, we've managed to slay several sacred gods without suffering losses. As god slayers, do you think we wouldn't dare to see you as our cattle?"

Lying against centuries-old beast equivalent to an ace mech wouldn't work. Ves also didn't feel the need to lie to the beast. He believed she was intelligent enough to process his meaning without lashing out.

While Qilanxo initially raged, eventually she recognized her precarious position. Even now, a squad of melee mechs stood guard just outside the holding chamber. If the sacred god ever acted out, they received orders to storm in and butcher the sacred god before she could call down an energy tornado or make any other offensive moves.

After some time of communicating with the sacred god, Ves lost all fear and apprehension towards the beast. He fearlessly approached her prone form and patted her rough scaly jaw with his seemingly tiny gauntleted palm.

"If you want to blame anyone, then blame your deadbeat mate who dragged you into a foolish attack against our forces. For now, just give Captain Byrd and Lieutenant Dise a chance. Even if you don't like them too much, at least pretend you do."

Once he said his piece, he exited the chamber after a quick farewell. Ves sighed all the while.

"This is just the start. I still need to cobble together an actual neural interface that can establish a wireless connection.

This would not only test his engineering knowledge and his understanding of neural interfaces, but also drag in exobiologists due to their indispensable expertise in biological constructs.

Ves tallied what he needed to do for his next steps.

First, he needed to figure out how the blessed people and the cursed people interfaced with the god species.

Second, he had to apply this knowledge into constructing an interface that operated in a similar fashion by translating the thinking patterns of the two new beast riders to the thinking patterns of the natives.

"That is the key to this project."

Building a wireless neural interface wasn't as hard as it sounded. The true uncertainties came when Ves attempted to match the thinking patterns of a mech pilot to an exobeast.

From his ample experiments involving the dwarf captives, he already knew that the natives thought in a drastically different matter. Their thoughts were passionate, chaotic, wild and unstructured.

Though mech pilots sometimes incorporated some or all of those elements, their thinking patterns actually drifted closer to the logic loops of an artificial processor.

When he thought about the challenges involved with converting the clean, clear thinking patterns of a modern day mech pilot to the chaotic thinking patterns of a dwarf chieftain, Ves heavily frowned.

"Is this even needed? Or can a mech pilot interface with a sacred god without special training?"

All of this was new to Ves, and his inexperience showed as he became a bit indecisive. When it came to matters surrounding a neural interface, Ves would never be able to match the ability of a true specialist in neural interface like Iris Jupiter.

He couldn't help but fear that one of his mistakes might cripple Captain Orfan and Lieutenant Dise's ability to pilot mechs.

When Ves returned to the camp, he remembered one of the issues that cropped up and took a visit to the workshop. Even though most mech technicians already called it a day at this period of time, Ketis still remained behind in one of the offices. She scrunched her head as she fiddled with the design schematic of a damaged rifleman mech.

"Having problems?"

"Yes! I'm dying out here!" She whined. "These mech technicians are all insufferable! They used to fear me, but now they resent me. I can beat up one or twelve of them if I want, but if I want to get them back in line I have to beat hundreds of them at this rate! I almost wanted to do so anyway, but then who will be left to repair the mechs?"

This sounded fairly odd to Ves. "Why did they suddenly grow a spine?"

Ketis scowled. "It's the chief technicians. They banded together and convinced them all that I'm no good and that my words have no weight. I wanted to beat them up next, but then who would keep the mech technicians in line?"

"Obviously, beating people up will only make things worse." Ves pointed out. "Have you thought of other solutions besides resorting to violence?"

"Nothing I've tried has any effect! These mech technicians think they're better than me. No matter what I say, they stick to themselves."

This was starting to sound like organized resistance. The situation reached a state where Ves could no longer sit back. He had to intervene.

"Tell me about the most recalcitrant chief technicians. In situations like these, there's often a small circle of leaders agitating the workers. Our solution has to begin with the cadre first."

## Chapter 829 A Short Excursion

The issue with the chief technicians fermenting organized opposition to Ketis did not do their productivity any good. Their stubbornness about taking back control only delayed the repairs to the point of pushing off moving date by another standard day.

The fundamental issue was that the chief technicians felt that the mech designers encroached on their territory. They may not have the guts to fight back against Ves, but they didn't hold the same amount of apprehension towards Ketis or any of the other mech designers.

The biggest issue was that even though some of these chief technicians only reached their rank due to seniority rather than competence, Ves couldn't make any moves to remove them. Who would replace these technicians? As much as seniority was a flawed basis to determine rank, they mostly knew a lot more tricks of the trade.

Mech technicians generally advanced very slowly as they needed to service thousands of mechs over several decades in order to master more competences.

Chief technicians not only needed to be good leaders, but also had to become proficient in servicing almost every aspect of a mech, from its core components, its limbs, its sensor systems, its weapon systems, its armor system and much, much more.

This meant at minimum they needed to master at least twelve major technical domains related to mechs.

As mech technicians generally didn't consist of highly-educated individuals who could have become mech designers instead, they generally learned by doing rather than studying theories. This process took time. Lots of time.

Yet at the end of it, a capable chief technician became extraordinarily adept concerning the practical aspects of fabricating and servicing mechs. Many mech designers simply weren't their equal when it came to practicality.

This was also why they disliked mech designers, especially younger ones, poking their nose in their business. Mech designers almost always made them feel dumb due to their superior grasp of theory, but their practical experience was often so low that it was basically non-existent.

Mech designers talked the talk, but couldn't walk the walk.

The opposite rang true in the case of the chief technicians.

They might not be able to know why something needed to be done in certain ways, but they just knew their solutions worked.

In the most ideal case, combining both practice and theory in the workshops would result in the highest level of performance. Mech designers planned or advised the work crews while the chief technicians

This was how things were supposed to happen, at least on paper.

The Mech Corps didn't go through the trouble of drafting all of those junior mech designers working in the private sector for nothing. That it helped weed out the weak ones and reduced the competition at the bottom of the market was an added bonus in their regard.

This was also why the Mech Corps didn't hand over too much power to the mech designers. In their own businesses, mech designers occupied a distinct superiority over chief technicians.

In the Mech Corps, the chief technicians held more power than the mech designers. They commanded the men and their orders bore the weight of official authority. Because a lot of new and inexperienced mech designers

tended to be drafted during wars and screwed things up, chief technicians always leaned towards a hostile relationship to these upstarts.

In this case, the grievances of the Vandals chiefs weren't entirely baseless, which made it a bit more challenging for Ves to address. He couldn't come up with an easy approach that magically solved the problems.

"Do you understand now what kind of situation you're in?"

"I guess." Ketis answered. "All I want to know is how I can get the men to listen to me again."

"In the long term, you need to become more proficient in working with mechs than the chiefs themselves. This is the best solution! Once you are able to overpower the chiefs in this area, they don't have a leg to stand on. Their main complaint right now is that you are incompetent! If you can turn this disparity around, then their argument will instantly be turned against them. By then, the mech technicians have no other choice than to acknowledge your solutions over the chiefs."

Ves already reached this point and beyond, which was one of the reasons why he could command the workshop without taking the chiefs into account. They were merely better mech technicians in his eyes.

Unfortunately, Ketis had a long way to go. She frowned. "You said that's a long-term solution. I've been studying up in my free time, but it will take years for me to reach that point. We need to do something now rather than later."

Time presented a problem once again. Ves always faced situations where time became one of the scarcest resources. He always wanted more time, but never received enough to go around.

With a sufficient amount of time, Ves would have the leisure to pursue a perfect solution. Sadly, time waited for no one, so he always became forced to take a step back and resort to an imperfect solution.

"Right now, we have to break the resistance." Ves concluded. "And do so in a way that doesn't take out too many chief technicians and mech technicians."

"Are we going to beat some people up?" She grinned.

"Not quite. Vandals are a rowdy bunch and they're not unaccustomed to brawls in the workplace. Fists aren't as intimidating to them as you think."

"Then how are you going to break the resistance?"

"By resorting to other means."

After he spoke those ominous words, Ves began to invite the chiefs to his office one by one.

While they could have ignored his command if they really wanted to, his prestige was so high that it would only lead to worse outcomes if they dared to defy him. So the chiefs unwillingly filed inside his office.

The first chief entered with a disgruntled face. "You want something from me, Mr. Larkinson."

"Please sit down."

Once the chief sat down, Ves began his spiel.

"I've invited you here to mediate your differences with Ketis."

"That Swordmaiden gal? Pah! She doesn't belong in a Vandal workshop! She doesn't belong in any workshop at all! I don't mean no disrespect, but putting her in charge over us is a big fat mistake!"

"I disagree." Ves smiled. "And I intend to convince you of that fact."

"With what? Siccing her on me? If you dare to do something to me, the mech technicians will riot, I will guarantee you!"

The chiefs weren't stupid and they already formed some rumors. All of this laid the groundwork for a riot in the event something truly bad happened to one of their own.

Ves didn't care.

"Ketis, please restrain this fellow."

A form the chief hadn't noticed sprung from the wall and roughly grabbed hold of the chief's hazard suit. She proficiently restrained the older man with the help of her heavy combat armor.

The chief stood no chance.

"What's the meaning of this?! The mech technicians won't stand for this!?"

"I'm not going to hurt you, chief. I only want to bring you along to a little field trip. Let's go."

Ves, Ketis and her restrained prisoner exited the office and walked across the camp to board a fast transport. A regular transit channel already emerged where fast transports went back and forth between the camp and Qilanxo's holding chamber every half hour.

Once the fast transport arrived at the holding chamber, the three went past the security checkpoint without any fuss due to Ves and walked all the way up to Qilanxo.

Currently, the two candidate beast riders set up a rotation where they spent at least six hours in Qilanxo's company. Their superiors relieved most of their former duties in order to make time for these lengthy bonding sessions.

Mostly, these sessions consisted of Captain Orfan or Lieutenant Dise regaling the curious sacred god of their many exploits among the stars. Qilanxo eagerly listened to any stories that took place on very different worlds and star systems.

Right now, Lieutenant Dise regaled the beast with some of the many sights she witnessed roaming through the frontier with the Swordmaidens. She quickly halted when she noted the newcomers.

"Mr. Larkinson! Ketis! Who is this?"

"Just a chump that needs a lesson." Ketis grinned back.

"What are you doing?! Why are you taking me to this animal! I don't want to be here! This is illegal!"

Despite all the yelling and moaning, nobody stepped forward to stop them because of Ves. Anything he got involved in usually helped out the Vandals. Though they didn't understand why he brought an unwilling person to the holding chamber, they didn't particularly see the need to intervene.

"This is my good friend Qilanxo. She's a sacred god and our newest ally." Ves regaled the chief. "She's also the reason why I can't preside over the workshops anymore. Researching the man-beast connection and trying to replicate this feat takes up all of my time."

"What does that have to do with bringing me to this beast?!"

"Don't address Qilanxo like she's a herd animal. She's a sacred god! Even if the title is false, she is still an infinitely greater organism than a little stain like you."

"We're humans! We're better than beasts!"

"In my perspective, you're a cockroach in front of her." Ves coolly stated. "You aren't even worthy of standing before this sacred god."

"What are you doing. Wait! Don't bring me closer! Ahhhh!"

When Ves commanded Ketis to bring the chief closer, she roughly dragged him forward and threw him into Qilanxo's waiting maw. Ketis threw him with enough forward momentum to fly between the gap of Qilanxo's massive razor

sharp teeth, but not enough to cause him to slide down through the sacred god's throat.

The chief panicked. There was something very frightening and traumatic about being thrown inside the maw of a giant exobeast. The man practically broke down as fears of being chewed into half by Qilanxo's teeth or being swallowed down into her stomach, never to return occupied his thoughts.

Ves let the chief stew inside Qilanxo's maw for a single minute before speaking up. "That's enough, Qilanxo. Please bring the poor man out."

Qilanxo lazily lidded an eye towards Ves, as if she resented that he brought her a meal but didn't allow her to gulp it down. Nevertheless, her massive tongue lifted up and out of her widening maw.

With a light flick, her tongue threw the unstable chief against the ground, forcing his wet and saliva-ridden hazard suit to absorb the impact.

His helmet had already unfolded in order to protect them against the highly potent substances inside Qilanxo's spit.

"Ketis, please bring the chief to decontamination to clean up his hazard suit. We'll be returning to camp as soon as that's done."

"Okay."

Ketis roughly lifted up the prone and insensate chief and carried him towards decontamination.

As for Ves, he looked at Qilanxo and bowed lightly. "Thanks for your cooperation."

The beast let out a disgruntled-sounding roar to Ves.

"There are five more people who need to be taught a lesson. As long as you cooperate, I'll make it up to you. I think I can persuade the Vandals to hunt down a wild god and have you eat its flesh. How does that sound like?"

Qilanxo roared out a light approval.

"You like that? And you want to have the first pick of what to eat? Why so?"

She released several roars, each of which contained complex meanings.

"You want to eat its murky crystal?" Ves frowned. Though the Vandals didn't know the value of these strange crystal growths, they knew it was important somehow. "What purpose does that serve?"

She roared again, but this time Ves widened his eyes.

"Is that true?!"

In the meantime, Lieutenant Dise stood at the side watching Ves talk to Qilanxo as if he held a normal conversation.

For some reason, she felt very inadequate.

#### **Chapter 830 Crunchy Snack**

Ves repeated the short excursion with each recalcitrant chief technician. Each time, he commanded Ketis to throw them into Qilanxo's maw, who spat out the panicking fellows after a minute of imagining all sorts of horrors.

Despite returning them unharmed, their spirit and confidence essentially broke. The trauma of residing inside the maw of a giant monster became imprinted in their minds. The parting words from Ves also didn't help them get over their ordeal.

Every time they returned to camp, Ves patted their shoulder with mock-friendliness. "I hope I won't hear any complaints about you again. If I do, then don't blame me for tossing you back inside Qllanxo's mouth. She's well-behaved for now, but don't forget that she eats natives for breakfast, lunch and dinner. There's a chance she'll slip up and confuse you for a snack. I pray that doesn't happen to you, but you never know."

This 'friendly reminder' only exacerbated their trauma and scared the wits out of them well after their brief excursion.

To be honest, what Ves just did to all of the chiefs was tantamount to torture and abuse. The only reason why Ves got away with it was that he could already do whatever he wanted, within reason.

While these impromptu sessions definitely toed the line, he made sure never to cross it. Mental torture was a lot less transparent than physical torture. Ves was sure if he ordered Ketis to beat up the chiefs, he'd be met with howls of protests.

Yet because Ves never physically harmed the chiefs, it became extraordinarily difficult for the victims to leverage their suffering into outrage.

In the end, the Flagrant Vandals was still lacking in terms of institutional constraints. They never really paid attention to governance and rules, and only when Colonel Lowenfield took command of the mech regiment did they begin to shore up their compliance.

Still, no matter how much the legendary colonel managed to reform the mech regiment, a leopard couldn't change its spots. They were scoundrels at heart who preferred to follow unwritten rules rather than the written ones formulated by the Mech Corps.

The unwritten rules and conventions the Flagrant Vandals adhered to possessed a lot of gaps and shortcomings. However, the guiding principle at the heart of them were also exceedingly simple, so much so that it didn't take much convincing for the Vandals to adopt them wholeheartedly.

Another way of putting it was that the end justified the means.

"The method doesn't matter as long as it works." Ves repeated to Ketis.

"Captain Byrd and all the other worrywarts won't find fault with me as long as the chief technicians no longer stir any trouble. In the short term, they should

be sufficiently cowed as they are wracked with nightmares and irrational fears."

"You make it sound as if it won't work anymore."

"Time solves all wounds. Sooner or later, the chiefs won't let their trauma get in the way of their interests, especially if they undergo therapy and take some medicines. This is also good, because I don't want these experienced mech technicians to be incapacitated forever. Even if they are bastards, they still possess vital skills."

"So what if they recover and go back to their old ways?" Ketis frowned. "Do we toss them inside Qilanxo's mouth again?"

"Hopefully not. I think that by the time their mental wounds fade, you've gained enough experience and studied a sufficient amount of supplementary textbooks that you know your way around the workshops by then. Remember what I said last time? As long as you can out-technician a chief technician, the entire basis of their complaints no longer exists."

Essentially, Ves bought Ketis a month or two of time to grow into her role. After the mech technicians heard what happened to their chiefs, they no longer stuck out their necks and obediently performed their duties without any fuss.

Though the mech technicians didn't show much motivation in their work, at least their productivity went back to normal.

With that problem solved for the time being, Ves returned to his old duties. He began the difficult process of trying to figure out how to build a neural interface that connected the mind of a human to the mind of a beast.

It quickly became clear that while he didn't have to make too many complicated changes to the hardware, the programming needed to be changed.

Having studied the way the dwarf captives interfaced with mechs, it became clear that the natives used a different thought protocol to baseline humans. Though Ves never measured the data patterns emerging from one of the blessed people's beast riders, he bet that they probably followed the same thought patterns when they interfaced with their sacred gods.

Essentially, the natives communicated with the god species in an entirely different language from what normal mech pilots used when interfacing with their mechs.

"Why complicate matters and resort to a different language?" One of the experts in the beast rider project expressed her puzzlement. "If the natives and the god species are engineered to be compatible with each other, why not take the simple route and make use of the existing mental languages of mech pilots?"

"It's not entirely correct to refer to the thought patterns as a language. That is simply a metaphor to describe something more complex." Ves warned. "As for the reason why, I think it has to do with the neural receptor inside the heads of the god species."

Every wild god and sacred god grew out an organic neural interface, but functioned substantially different from mechanical neural interfaces. Study into these structures continued, but the exobiologists lacked crucial knowledge needed to decipher their greater functions. The organic neural interface incorporated both mech designer and exobiologist expertise.

In the face of these difficulties, Ves could only fumble forward and hope they managed to get it correct. All of this took huge amounts of research, involving not only Qilanxo, but also the dwarf captives.

When Ves brought one of their dwarf captives to Qilanxo one day, the beast grew angry. It stared at the unkempt diminutive figure held in place by a pair of security officers with heated eyes.

She considered the cursed people to be her enemy!

Ves attempted to explain why he brought forth the dwarf. "We need to perform some experiments. We don't know how we can get your new chosen to interface with your minds, as they lack the genetic modification to do so by themselves. We can only try and emulate the way this dwarf interfaces with your mind. The readings we accumulate will help us enormously. Are you willing to cooperate?"

Qilanxo widened her maw and released an angry roar. The sheer air released by the sacred god bowled Ves over and caused the security officers to lean backwards a bit.

Faster than anyone could recover, Qilanxo yanked forward with her head and pulled against her restraints. She slithered out her tongue, which stretched much farther than anyone suspected, and somehow managed to hook onto the dwarf.

The tongue pulled the unlucky dwarf out of the grips of the security officers before landing squarely inside Qilanxo's mouth.

This time, she didn't hold back her restraint. Her teeth slammed shut, causing gouts of blood to spill to the sides!

With a couple of brutal chewing motions, Qilanxo mercilessly mangled the dead dwarf's corpse before she swallowed it down to her stomach.

The security officers all became alarmed while the researchers nearby all took a lot of healthy steps back. Some of them had been in range of that tongue! If Qilanxo ever felt like it, she could have snapped them all up as a snack!

"Calm down! Calm down!" Ves yelled, trying to prevent the Vandals from doing anything extreme. "She had a bad response against the dwarf, but we're different!"

It took some time to calm down people's tempers and shut off all the alerts. Qilanxo regained her peace after eating the dwarf the Vandals had the temerity to present in front of her august presence.

Obviously, people's vigilance towards Qilanxo increased, but to their credit neither Orfan nor Dise displayed any fright.

"The big girl here is okay with us." Captain Orfan said. Having spent a significant amount of time in Qilanxo's company did much to dispel their initial fears over being in the presence of a dangerous exobeast.

Even though she was large enough to snap them with her maw, she was also a very intelligent creature. That fascinated the mech officers, and helped them bond with her. It was kind of like bonding with a pet dog, though perhaps a hundred times bigger.

The inability of them to directly put a dwarf into contact with Qilanxo set back the beast rider project. Ves ultimately had to resort to using the abundant data gathered through the frequent mental resilience training sessions that went on at the Mind Blender.

The training sessions went back into full swung a while ago, enabling it to capture every scrap of data the dwarf channeled to the neural interfaces of the test cockpits.

While most of the data looked like gibberish to Ves, the testing facility gathered so many readings that Ves thought about translating them to normal human thought patterns.

"If I can translate this gibberish, I can incorporate a conversion filter into the neural interface of the beast riders." Ves surmised. "Each interaction between

beast rider and the sacred god goes through the filter that essentially performs real-time translations."

Ves initially wanted to 'translate' the gibberish by having the dwarf interface directly with Qilanxo and have her describe the meanings. Unfortunately, Qilanxo very much opposed that plan.

Therefore, as an alternative, Ves had to resort to trial and error and attempt to work out something indirectly. All of this was very complicated but it basically amounted to a lot of data crunching, improvisation, educated guesswork and dangerous experimentation.

"That sounds right up my alley." Ves ruefully grinned.

While Ves slowly started with the data gathered from the Mind Blender and cobbled together a heavily modified neural interface, several days passed by.

Eventually, the mech technicians from both the Vandals and the Swordmaidens managed to fix up the mechs that sustained varying amounts of damage from the orbital bombardment and the attack by the sacred gods.

While the repairs only fixed the essentials and left many problems untouched, the mechs at least regained their mobility. As long as they could keep pace with the ground expedition as it moved, the mech technicians could always perform the repairs during the lengthy rest stops.

Of course, the frequent unscheduled halts due to turbulence from the astral winds also resumed, much to everyone's irritations.

One of the biggest changes to the expedition was the addition of Qilanxo.

With their mechs mounted on heavy transports, both beast rider candidates spent much of their time in Qilanxo's company, attempting to make sure she followed after the column of fast and heavy transports.

In order to make sure she kept to the route, a rotating squad of melee mechs constantly surrounded her humongous body. With the presence of these mechs, Qilanxo had no choice but to move in the designated direction.

"Urrggh. That stinks!"

The main reason why the ground expedition placed Qilanxo at the rear was due to her enormous toilet breaks. The Flagrant Swordmaidens already diverted mechs into hunting the surrounding wildlife in order to keep the voracious sacred god fed.

At the start of the resumption of their trek, Qilanxo frequently took forlorn glances in the direction of the ancient city of Samar. Wherever the foreigners from beyond the stars took her, she might never be able to go back to the city she resided at for hundreds of years.

Fortunately, the constant company of the candidate beast riders kept her company and prevented her from growing too lonely.

"Don't worry big girl. Everyone needs to leave their home." Captain Orfan soothed the melancholic sacred god. "Think about all the new things you get to see! There's an entire planet for you to explore!"