

### Chapter 831 Long Trek

The Flagrant Swordmaidens began their lengthy march across Seven. It took around two months to reach the turbulent hemisphere. This was the side of the globe that centered around the Starlight Megalodon's crash site.

Once they crossed into this storm-wracked region, the ground expedition could no longer receive any shipments from the fleet up in orbit. Not even the sturdiest transports would be able to make it through the roiling astral winds alive.

While that hadn't stopped the Starlight Megalodon from launching an antimatter torpedo through those very same turbulent higher-dimensional particles, the visitors didn't possess the same advanced technologies.

During the lengthy journey, the men and women had plenty of work to do. Not only did mechanical breakdowns occur several times more frequently despite all their precautions, a lot of research also needed to be done.

The two major research projects occupied most people's attention.

The most critical project by far consisted of unlocking the potential of the god crystals. The Vandals gathered an entire pile of them when they took them off the dead bodies of Pairixan and his subordinate gods.

Despite the many attempts by the engineers and other specialists to elicit a reaction out of these mysterious god crystals, they stubbornly remained inert.

Chief Engineer Dakkon tried everything from whacking them with force, zapping them with electricity, exposing them to different forms of electromagnetic radiation, cooking them or freezing them with different levels of temperature.

Nothing worked. Not even touching them with their bodies helped. They missed an essential link. Without this essential link, their attempts to create a

local power source that could draw their energy from the astral winds stalled horribly.

Rather than resume their fruitless guessing and experimentation, the god crystal project started to cast hopeful eyes at the beast rider project.

"Ves, my boy!" Chief Dakkon said with a familiar tone to Ves as he sat behind a terminal. "When are you going to let the big girl do her thing?"

Exasperated at being interrupted from his difficult and tedious attempt at programming the translation filter for his beast rider neural interface, Ves turned around in his chair. "That's not up to me. It's up to Qilanxo herself to decide when she wants to demonstrate her powers to us. You know she's still wounded, right? Any exertion at this point will delay her recovery."

"She's practically healthy in my view! Surely these beasts are capable of drawing upon their powers when wounded, right? What's stopping Qilanxo from doing her tricks?"

Ves couldn't answer that question. He only knew that Qilanxo refused to call down an energy tornado or demonstrate her space barrier powers when asked. As for the reason why, Qilanxo refused to go into it. Privately, the experts in the research believed she still suffered from some lingering trauma due to barely surviving the explosion that defeated her mate.

In any case, neither Ves nor the candidate beast riders thought it would be a good idea to push Qilanxo. It already chafed her to be a virtual prisoner amidst the Flagrant Swordmaidens. Menacing mechs continued to keep an eye on her, ready to spring into action if she ever rebelled from her captivity.

The change from being a god and ruler over hundreds of thousands of people to a lowly draft animal to a strange group of outsider humans already affected her mood. Ves basically banked on time and daily interaction by Captain

Orfan and Lieutenant Dise to lessen her animosity and lower her objections towards cooperation.

Pushing Qilanxo to demonstrate her powers needed to be done eventually, but moving too quickly while she was undergoing a change in mentality might harm their relationship irreparable.

To be frank, Ves hoped to convert Qilanxo from a captive into a willing collaborator. If she was willing to let go of the grievances of the past, then they didn't have any reason to remain hostile.

Over the last month, Qilanxo not only started to recover her old strength, but she healed many old wounds that had been left as mementos of her early life of conflict and struggle. Certain advanced supplements and treatments even enhanced her original body quality and invigorated her mind.

As long as this luxurious care continued, Qilanxo would definitely be able to surpass her old self!

All of this was part of a deliberate carrot and stick to encourage the sacred god to willingly throw herself into their camp. The key to luring her to their side was that the stick shouldn't hit too hard.

Nevertheless, the ground expedition's energy budget started to look worse and worse. With the loss of three essential power generators, of which the fleet only sent a single replacement copy, the mechs and transports would eventually run out of energy to move their limbs in two months or less.

This was far too fast! They wouldn't be able to reach the Starlight Megalodon under their own power at this rate!

Therefore, Chief Dakkon's concerns grew increasingly more important. If the Flagrant Swordmaidens had to choose between taming a sacred god and mastering the ability to generate power from the god crystals, they would definitely choose the latter.

Though Ves knew how important such an outcome represented, he really didn't want to abandon the soft approach to Qilanxo. He developed a soft spot for her, just like how a mech designer adored their custom mechs.

Put more cynically, he became obsessed into his attempt of trying to turn Qilanxo into a mech analog. As a mech designer, he couldn't stand leaving such a promising mech unfinished.

"Give me a timeframe then, Ves. When do you think Qilanxo will be ready to show off her tricks?"

"Before we cross over to the stormy side of Seven at the very least. Four weeks. No more."

Most of the exobiologists agreed that Qilanxo reached a healthy state, though it would still take half a year for her to grow into her peak state.

"I'll hold you to that promise. You better get her ready in four weeks or less. The project I'm in charge of is basically without direction without this advancement."

As the Flagrant Swordmaidens continued to navigate across the planet, they came across many wondrous sights. Lush fields of grass that stretched unendingly. Herds consisting of hundreds of thousands of animals moving slowly in unison. Wild gods lazing underneath the astral winds, only waking once every half month to gorge upon the nearest herds of animals.

The terrain varied wildly as well. One day, they'd be travelling through sparse desert-like terrain. Other days, they forcefully felled the trees as they cut their way straight through an ancient forest.

Due to the human terraforming activities initiated long ago, many local plants and animals bore the unremarkable genetic stamp of Old Earth. However, their genes incorporated many interesting modifications that improved a lot of aspects, chiefly among them the adaptation to heavy gravity.

Sometimes, original aborigine wildlife popped up here and there that resisted extinction. For one reason or another, these exotic-looking plants and animals survived the displacement by the aggressive Earth-derived species and stubbornly clung onto life in their new ecological niches.

For the exobiologists, all of this interesting biodiversity practically presented a mystery to them. This was because they continued to see signs of deliberate intervention and change.

The entire planet's ecology was an artificial construct from the start ever since the Starlight Megalodon touched down on this planet.

Sometimes, Ves would sit on top of a heavy transport and look out at the different sights underneath the perpetual golden glow of the astral winds. As the transports stopped to make a temporary camp for the 'night', most Vandals and Swordmaidens went to sleep, though a sufficient amount of mech pilots remained awake to stand on guard.

No threats popped up during this time. One reason was that the ground expedition deliberately steered clear of any ancient city. They never strayed within two-hundred kilometers of one of the cities ruled by the sacred gods and blessed people.

This sometimes forced them to make awkward detours that added a couple of extra days to their schedule. However, Captain Byrd much preferred to avoid interacting with the locals than to risk another incident like what happened with Samar.

As time continued to flow by, more changes happened. For one, the frequent mental resilience training sessions taking place at the Mind Blender became somewhat of a staple to the mech pilots. The sessions only happened during the downtime, allowing the mech pilots to enjoy a good rest afterwards so that they could resume piloting their mechs with very little hindrances.

While their overall performance hadn't increased, several reports from some of the more observant mech captains already detected some cautiously positive changes to the quality of their subordinates.

"The mech pilots are more attentive and patient. They used to complain all the time when assigned to lengthy reconnaissance missions, but now they stoically accept every tedious task!"

"The men last much longer during simulation practice. They're far more willing to endure difficulties than before. It's surprising how much has changed!"

This transformation occurred most dramatically among the ranks of the Flagrant Vandals. While the Swordmaidens experienced some improvements as well, the mental quality of their mech pilots had always been stellar, so the added boost was merely a cherry on top.

From all of the data Ves had gathered to quantify and track these changes over time, he managed to come up with two conclusions.

First, the mental resilience training sessions impacted low-quality mech pilots the most. Those with attitude problems or underwent faulty training that left them with shaky minds and unsteady discipline somehow stiffened up after they underwent a dozen rounds of training sessions.

One change led to another. A higher tolerance for pain and suffering also increased their tolerance to endure the work they used to shirk.

In some way, this training method could be utilized to iron out a large amount of shoddy mech pilots. While it didn't turn them into elites, at the very least it shaved off some of their bad habits and instilled them with both patience and tolerance.

Second, the training sessions continued to pay dividends even after most of these changes played out. The doctors paying attention to the changes in

their minds noted gradual changes in their brain structure in response to having their mind slightly messed around with by the dwarf captives.

What these changes truly led to, Ves wasn't sure. Many experts taking part of the beast rider project believed these changes may not even be benign.

In the face of all of these uncertainties, Ves reluctantly curtailed the operation of the Mind Blender project. Instead of letting mech pilots go through a training session once every three days, Ves reduced the rate to once every two weeks, mostly to preserve their existing gains.

This was the shortest interval the doctors came up with that wouldn't stimulate the brains of the mech pilots to adapt to the foreign impulses.

Ves felt like he was drawing his mech pilots back from overdosing on the stimulants he initially hooked them up with. Once he announced reduction in training sessions, many Vandals and Swordmaidens actually protested.

"Why did you stop?! I can't go without my fix! Let me in! Didn't you want us to train our minds?!"

"This is unfair! Who let you be in charge?! My performance in the simulations shot up by thirty percent, and this isn't my limit!"

Already used to being jeered at by mech pilots, Ves readily ignored their howls. He found it funny that a few months ago, they cried about what a torture it was to enter the Mind Blender.

Now, they actively fought against the reduction in training sessions.

Nonetheless, Ves really feared what might happen if the dwarf captives continued to muck about in their minds through the neural interface of their test mechs. Would they begin to take dwarf-like traits?

Ves shuddered when he considered that possibility. Once every two weeks should be more than enough to maintain the mental health of the mech pilots.

"Let it not be said that I've brainwashed our own mech pilots into becoming dwarf sympathisers."

Speaking of the dwarves, they encountered many different tribes along their way. The Mind Blender frequently replaced their worn out dwarf captives by kidnapping new ones from these inconsequential dwarves.

One day, however, they encountered something much more formidable than a small tribe of a few hundred dwarfs riding on their godling pack mounts.

They encountered a large nomadic dwarf tribe. One with several wild gods under their control. Or was it the other way around?

### Chapter 832 Cribbing Wheels

The ancient cities populated by the sacred gods and the blessed people regarded those who lived outside the city walls as cursed. The dwarves with their ugly, squat forms became affected by the curse of the soil, and developed an irreconcilable hatred against the folk who enjoyed a relatively easy life inside their thick and sturdy city walls.

The dwarves as a whole lived nomadically due to their dependence on following the massive animal herds for sustenance.

If they settled at a single place, they either exhaust the surrounding animal herds or get trampled by hundreds of thousands of animals marching in a single direction.

The dwarf tribes therefore wandered endlessly as they followed after the animal herds, hunting the old, weak and lame alongside the packs of predators.

Most managed to tame and domesticate godlings as their mounts and pack animals. This saved them from expending their energy by walking across the planet with their stubby legs, but it also placed further pressure on the tribes as the animals required much more sustenance.

Large dwarf tribes numbering more than ten-thousand individuals rarely emerged because at some point, the logistical pressure of feeding so many mouths through a nomadic lifestyle was simply too hard.

However, the situation changed when the dwarf tribes managed to tame a wild god. With this apex predator as their biggest weapon and most luxurious pack animal, the wild gods in partnership with the dwarf tribes turned into regional hegemony.

None except other wild gods could match their might, and they never fought among themselves except if one challenged the other over territory. This rarely happened as the planet's surface was big enough to make room for much more wild gods.

The dwarf tribes generally obtained the cooperation of wild gods in two ways. The first method was to nurture and protect a godling mount from young. This was quite difficult as godlings in their adolescence became aggressive and eager to prove themselves. The dwarf tribes often warred among themselves and against deadly packs of predators.

For a godling mount to survive to a century old was extremely difficult, as their growth and food intake accelerated hugely in their final growth spurt!

Yet if a tribe managed to protect their biggest godling mount during this difficult time, they would be rewarded with a completely loyal wild god, who held boundless affection for the tribe that cared and protected it from its birth!

Another way a tribe could obtain a wild god was to come to an accord with one of the many wild gods roaming the lands by themselves. However, these free spirits ordinarily didn't accept the dwarves, as they lived blissful lives by themselves as regional overlords who reigned from the top of the food chain.

Only under rare and exceptional circumstances would such tyrants agree to bond themselves with a dwarf tribe.

These feral and unruly wild gods possessed a much more domineering spirit than their more docile cousins. These feral wild gods typically developed wild ambitions as more and more dwarves started to worship these magnificent exobeasts.

Affected by the racial hatred and biases of the dwarves, these wild gods slowly adopted these same prejudices and began to hate the blessed people and the sacred gods as well!

It was always these wild gods grew jealous of the city dwellers and attacked their ancient cities!

Therefore, once the scout mechs reported sight of a large dwarf tribe led by three different wild gods, none of the Flagrant Swordmaidens thought about approaching them with a hand of peace.

"We should steer clear of this tribe. There's no point in picking a fight with them, which they'll be sure to do once they see our forces and realize that we aren't dwarves."

"We should attack! There's a lot of research we can perform on those wild gods and their dwarf riders! They're different from the solitary lazy brutes that spend their time sleeping and eating without end!"

Most people in the expedition preferred to avoid any further trouble and delays. However, a small number of people thought the opposite. In particular, the experts of the beast rider project including Ves pushed to attack the dwarves.

He presented the case in a small emergency meeting between the Vandal officers and chiefs.

"The beast rider project is progressing at a glacial pace right now because we have never gathered any detailed data on a man-beast connection in action." He began. "The neural interface that we are developing is mostly propped up

by guesswork rather than solid data and theory. There's a chance that it might work in connecting our candidate beast riders with Qilanxo's bestial mind, but there is an even larger chance that it might fry their minds into a crisp!"

Many early attempts at interfacing the mind of a human to the mind of an animal never ended well for both. Neural interfaces became prohibited technology for a long time until the advent of mechs.

Mechs were non-living machines that thought in well-ordered machine logic and patterns! Mech pilots found it a lot easier to interface with mechs than with living animals that possessed chaotic thought patterns.

While neural interface technology advanced by leaps and bounds ever since they became popular with mechs, Ves did not have access to the restricted knowledge concerning those fields. He basically found himself back in time where he needed to reinvent the wheel on his own.

This was a daunting task, as neural interface technology only truly became safe to establish a man-beast connection after centuries of research performed by millions of specialist researchers!

Ves may possess certain advantages, but he'd never be able to close that big of a gap by himself!

Therefore, the only alternative to reinventing the wheel was to steal someone else's wheel and reverse engineer it to produce his own plagiarized wheel!

It wasn't as if the dwarves or whoever originally engineered their genes could file a patent violation complaint to the MTA!

He emphatically presented his case to the Vandals. "We know that the cursed people can safely and successfully interface with their tribal wild gods. If we managed to secure this pairing alive, we can strap them with loads of sensors and point a million scanners at them while they are forced to demonstrate their abilities to us. As long as we can get a few hours worth of data, I can

virtually guarantee you that the modified neural interface for the beast riders will be absolutely safe. I dare say I can finish it within a week!"

"I think we should give it a shot, captain!" Chief Dakkon rose in support of the suggestion. "The god crystal project has been waiting for the beast rider project to achieve a breakthrough. Once they manage to get their beast riders bonded to Qilanxo, it'll be much easier for us to ask her to demonstrate how she makes use of the god crystals."

Dr. Tillman also pitched in. "Capturing a tribal wild god is also beneficial to the god crystal project. We've studied how Qilanxo's existing god crystals are embedded into her hide and flesh. If we can experiment with embedding one of our spare god crystals into the hide of a captive wild god, particularly one that is bonded to a high gravity variant human, we have hopes that we can perform the same procedure on Qilanxo!"

This not only furthered their understanding of the god crystals, but also allowed them to dangle another carrot in front of Qilanxo! Every sacred god liked to collect more god crystals.

Still, the risks of attacking a large tribe of wildlings under the protection of three mature wild gods was not a trifling matter. Though they lacked the god crystals that allowed them to accumulate a huge amount of energy, their bodies naturally stored a decent amount of intermediate energy, enough to power a couple of strong expressions of metaphysical abilities.

"We'll have to attack them from long range. We still carry the scrap from the old artillery cannons. Let's just assemble them close to the projected route of the dwarf tribe and fire the guns once they come into range!"

The Vandals developed various attack plans. Having learnt their lessons from Pairixan's attack, they no longer underestimated any of the god species no matter how weak and underdeveloped they might seem.

All of their heavy transports and most of their fast transports would be parked at least several days away. This put them well out of range of any counteroffensive and allowed them to maintain their distance against the hostile wildlings in the event of a pursuit, though the chances of that happening would be low because the wildlings shouldn't even be aware of the main convoy.

The attacking forces solely consisted of fast-moving mechs and disposable artillery cannons installed in place beforehand.

If the artillery batteries ever came under attack, all of the personnel manning the cannons could easily board a fast transport and abandon the position without crying over the losses. The value of the artillery cannons was a fraction of the assets secured on the main convoy.

However, as the mech officers bandied about more detailed offensive plans, Dr. Tillman suddenly made an unanticipated suggestion.

"Before we resort to direct combat, why not try to defeat them using a trick? During the last battle, we tried a number of hasty tricks. None of them worked, but back then we did not have a good understanding of physiology of the dwarves and the god species. It's different now. Over a span of two months, we've studied Qilanxo's body and performed deep studies into the remains of the sacred god carcasses. Right now, I am reasonably confident that we can develop irresistible bait then when ingested could instantly knock out any wild god as long as they aren't too old and powerful!"

"How confident are you of your chances of success? And why make another giant candy bar?"

"I'm eighty percent confident that it will work as long as a wild god ingests our adulterated bait. I'm only five percent confident we can manage to do the

same with an airborne substance. Therefore, the so-called candy bar presents the highest means of success."

"What about the dwarves?"

"They are much easier to take care of. After performing extensive studies on dozens of wildling captives and numerous wildling corpses, we have managed to achieve several breakthroughs. Their physique is very robust, but the knockout gas that we've developed can sedate the vast majority high gravity variant humans. However, this gas possesses such a high concentration of toxins that it is highly lethal to the blessed people and baseline humans such as us. Everyone has to wear an airtight suit if they want to enter a zone that's been affected by this gas."

Both of these developments had the potential of simplifying the confrontation. Though the Vandals weren't afraid of picking a fight with the dwarf tribe, if they could lay them down by using a few inexpensive tricks, then it was worth pursuing!

"Please outline your plan and tell me what you need in a report." Captain Byrd ordered. "I'll go over it with Commander Lydia, and if we both think it's viable, we'll implement it first as plan A."

Not many mech officers held much faith in the plan. Previously, Pairixan appeared tempted, but he recognized the trap for what it was and bypassed the giant candy bar made out of lots of nutrient packs.

Would the wild gods possess the same level of vigilance?

Ves privately expressed a bit more confidence. So long as the large dwarf tribe never encountered a force like the Flagrant Swordmaidens before, then they shouldn't be on guard against unusual encounters.

As the meeting ended and everyone started preparing their attack plans. This time the battle against ne natives shouldn't be a near-disaster like last time!

With an undeniable information advantage against the potentially dangerous dwarf tribe, the Flagrant Swordmaidens completely held the initiative. They could attack when they wanted to and retreat out of sight whenever something didn't go their way.

The wildling tribe and its wild gods wouldn't know what hit them if everything went right!

As for whether the wildling tribe deserved to be attacked or not, none of the Vandals really thought about those ethical issues. They were just a bunch of smelly savages, after all.

### Chapter 833 We Have Candy

It several days of preparation to put the pieces into place. Not only did the exobiologists require some time to synthesize the most attractive bait, the mechs and transports assigned to join the attack and secure the gains in the event of a victory also required time to reach the prospective battle site.

Throughout their maneuvers, the Flagrant Swordmaidens took an exceeding amount of care in keeping their presence a secret. All of the scout mechs keeping an eye on the large tribe followed them from behind in order to avoid revealing their presence through the footsteps that they helplessly left behind.

They also tried to position themselves downwind whenever possible so that the wild gods with their sensitive noses wouldn't be able to sniff out the presence of large metallic objects. While it was likely that the wild gods would mistake a metallic smell with the blessed people and the sacred gods, it would nonetheless raise their guard and make it that much harder to pull off an ambush.

During the start of the preparations, one unanticipated variable popped up.

When Qilanxo heard that the Flagrant Swordmaidens prepared to assault a large dwarf tribe, she wanted in on the action!

"Aren't you supposed to be recovering your health?" Ves asked dubiously.

Qilanxo roared several times with a mix of eagerness and indignation.

From what Ves gathered from her roars, he didn't think she'd need to make use of her powers. She wanted to confront the wild gods in a good ol' physical brawl!

"I'm sorry, Qilanxo, but that sounds far too risky to us. We have our own methods of combat. You of all sacred gods know how powerful we can be with our ranged weaponry."

Qilanxo released another angry roar. She didn't take no for an answer!

"We really can't let you enter the battlefield. Our mechs and fast transports move much faster than you with their antigrav fields active. If we ever need to retreat, someone as slow as you would be left behind!"

None of these issues concerned Qilanxo. Through hell or high water, she wanted to see the wild gods and smash their faces in! The hatred between the sacred gods and the tribal wild gods was so irreconcilable that they would always try to eliminate each other if found!

At some point, Qilanxo even threatened to take off on her own in the direction of the wildling tribe, to Ves had no choice but to ask permission to Captain Byrd to bring Qilanxo along.

To his surprise, she didn't seem opposed to the idea. "Do you believe that Qilanxo will become friendlier to us if we let her participate?"

This question put Ves aback. "Maybe. Maybe not. She's mainly driven by her hatred of the tribal wild gods. Our opinions don't matter to her. I think that some of her old habits as a sacred god worshipped by every blessed god in Samar has cropped up again. It may be a good idea to remind her who is in charge."

"Oh, that is definitely in the cards. I'll allow her to get close, but not so that she can have a slugging match against the wild gods." Captain Byrd smirked. "If plan A or plan B succeeds, then there is no need for her to demonstrate her prowess."

If the wild gods turned out to be more formidable than they expected, then Captain Byrd had no compulsions about Qilanxo's participation. Her intervention might be of significant help.

And if the plans cooked up by the Vandals succeeded, then Qilanxo would be able to witness first-hand how powerful they could be, thereby suppressing any ill intentions she might have harbored during her time in captivity.

Ves already understood these underlying reasons, so the call quickly ended without discussing these matters.

He turned back to Qilanxo and arranged her move ahead of time.

She moved slower than a fast transport but faster than a heavy transport. That left her in an awkward position, but that only meant that the execution of the plan only needed to be postponed by an additional day in order to allow the sacred god to come into range.

Four days later, all of the pieces fell into place. Ves had the option of staying behind with the convoy, but he opted to board one of the fast transports following on the heels of Qilanxo.

As for Captain Orfan and Lieutenant Dise, both rode atop Qilanxo's back. The beast rider project already designed secure carriages that integrated antigrav modules and many other systems.

As they both rode atop Qilanxo's back, they made sure the sacred god kept walking in the right direction.

The journey ended when they reached around twenty kilometers away from the wildling tribe. At that point, lots of mechs spread out and took positions around the unsuspecting dwarf tribe.

However, only plan B called for sending them into action. Before the Flagrant Swordmaidens sprung their ambush, they first employed plan A.

"Why do I feel like we're acting like creepy old men trying to lure a little kid with candy?" A Vandal said as he monitored the live feed of a trio of light mechs. All of them carried what amounted to giant candy bars.

This was not the hasty creation the exobiologists cooked up more than two months earlier. With time and advancements on their side, they refined the latest versions of the candy bars to an unprecedented degree.

Not only did the exobiologists synthesize the candy bars in an extremely nutritious form, they also enhanced their aroma to make them irresistible to the god species!

Not only that, but the substances the exobiologists laced the candy bars with should be able to affect the formidable biology of the wild gods when ingested!

Still, despite the promising signs of this plan, many Vandals but especially the Swordmaidens expressed skepticism and disdain at this course of action.

To the latter, the underhanded means of attempting to defeat the wildling tribe by poisoning was dishonorable.

While the wildling tribe may not be very sophisticated, as a warrior society they deserved to be fought in open combat! Only then would the Swordmaidens derive a sense of accomplishment to their victory!

To which the Vandals replied with a dismissive attitude. To the unconventional Vandals, any trick was okay so long as it worked. To avoid the enemy's

strength and target their weaknesses had always been the favored mode of combat to their mech regiment!

This clash in values threatened to strain the relationship between the two forces. Only when Commander Lydia reined in her Swordmaidens did the tensions stall. As much as she instilled her Swordmaidens with a warrior spirit, she recognized that they couldn't be too indulgent during their campaign in the Aeon Corona System.

The live feed of the three light mechs eventually showed them halting in place. After the mech pilots checked the coordinates, they all threw their payloads a fair distance away before taking off.

The Vandals cast the bait!

"Now we wait for the fish to bite."

Several hours went by as the large wildling tribe slowly made their way towards the site where the giant candy bars had been tossed.

Ves frequently directed his gaze to the footage transmitted by the scout mechs trailing after the procession.

When any dwarf tribe managed to secure the services of a wild god, they underwent an explosive growth in numbers and capabilities. With apex predators by their side that could easily hunt as many herd animals as they wanted, they never grew hungry anymore. This allowed the tribes to expand their numbers to an explosive degree.

The dwarf tribe the Flagrant Swordmaidens targeted numbered around twenty-thousand dwarves. Many of these individuals followed behind the ponderous footsteps of the three consecrated wild gods.

When so many individuals gathered at once, it became inevitable that some people had it better than others.

The warrior caste and their wives and children rode at the front. Their godling mounts were bigger and carried much more goods such as tents, beds, clothes and bone jewelry.

The ones that followed after them should be the servant caste. They didn't look as strong and well-fed as the warriors, but they performed essential activities such as caring for the godling mounts and cooking the meat the wildling gods deliver to their subjects.

As for the dwarfs at the very end of the procession, they mostly consisted of the old, the abandoned children, the exiles, the criminals and other characters the more upright dwarfs found unpleasant. The underclass lacked godling mounts to carry them forward, and mostly subsided through abject means.

The only reason why these dwarves on foot were able to keep up was because the tribe was too large to set a fast pace. Therefore, even underfed dwarves with their short legs could keep up with the tribe as it slowly roamed from animal herd to animal herd.

They seemed so human to Ves. Even after their genes experienced so many changes, he still found a trace of humanity when he witnessed them on the move.

It felt almost cruel to Ves for a bunch of outsiders like the Flagrant Swordmaidens to barge in out of nowhere and attack their entire tribe, just so they can capture their tribal wild gods.

So long as anything happened to the giant beasts, the entire wildling tribe wouldn't be able to feed so many mouths anymore. The tribe would starve and collapse within days!

Yet Ves didn't care. He wanted all three tribal wild gods at his disposal. With more test subjects, he could gather more data. With more data, his research became more robust.

Additional test subjects also allowed the Flagrant Swordmaidens to perform multiple high-risk experiments to confirm some of their latest developments.

Therefore, Ves firmly hoped the Flagrant Swordmaidens would be able to secure all three wild gods alive.

The candy bars formed out of thousands of nutrient packs dispersed their aroma into the winds. The same winds brought the smells towards the three wild gods at the head of the moving tribe.

One of them began to pick up a faint but extremely yummy smell.

It roared, calling the attention of the beasts next to it. After all three wild gods sniffed the air, they became mad!

Without any warning, they doubled their pace! From their previous slow stride, they hastened their movements, causing the rest of the wildling tribe following behind to panic!

The Vandals witnessing the disarray from the sudden changes laughed. "Look at them running around like headless chickens!"

"So much for their faith in their gods!"

Atop each wild god rested an elaborate palanquin that housed the dwarf chieftains and their attendants. Right now, they suffered from a shaky ride as the overeager wild gods didn't concern themselves about maintaining stability.

They wanted to reach the source of the smells as fast as possible!

After ten minutes of vigorous plodding, the wild gods reached the place where the light mechs tossed the candy bars.

Though the dwarf riders sitting atop the wild gods yelled at them to stop, the exobeasts didn't listen. They became fully enthralled by the smells!

"The wild gods are eating the candy bars!"

The creatures showed on vigilance towards the adulterated food and each of them gulped them down all at once!

"They were probably afraid the other gods would steal their snack, so they all jumped in first to secure at least one of the candy bars for themselves."  
Someone explained.

At the very least, this showed that the three wild gods enjoyed roughly equal positions.

As the food made their way into their stomach, the substances concentrated within started to apply their effects.

Due to the size of the beasts, it took at least ten minutes for the substances to take effect.

"The wild gods are swaying!"

But when they did, the effects were dramatic!

"They're falling unconscious!"

"The candy bars worked!"

"What?! I lost my bet! How could those beasts be so stupid?! I thought they were smarter than that!"

"Knock it off, men! Proceed to the next step of the plan! Secure the wild gods and gas the rest of the dwarf tribe!"

The Flagrant Swordmaidens almost couldn't believe the dumb plan to fool the wild gods actually worked. They belatedly proceeded with the next steps of the plan.

#### **Chapter 834 Interspecies Communication**

Those who bet against the success of the plan privately cursed. They lost a good amount of money over their belief that the wild gods couldn't possibly fail for such an elementary trick.

In fact, the way they overcame the wild gods was so ridiculously easy that people still couldn't get their minds over it. How gullible could the locals be to fall for such an obviously stupid trap?! Were all of the stories about the wild gods being dangerous expert mech-like existences that could think for themselves untrue?

"Through the man-machine connection, the man takes after the beast, and the beast takes after the man." Ves threw out his own theory inside one of the fast transports on the way to secure their new captives. "You have to remember that the wildlings aren't all that smart. They're a few hundred-thousand years too early to develop baseline human-level intelligence. They've forgotten all of their former human heritage and the many ways people rip each other off. So the wild god the dwarf rider is connected to really doesn't get much smarter."

The wild gods started feral, and their mental connections with the dwarf riders really didn't do too much to restrain their instincts. At most, they gained enough intelligence to express themselves, but their wild and unrestrained instincts still took precedence sometimes.

Especially when the exobiologists cooked up some meals that smelled so good to their olfactory senses that they couldn't resist a bite.

When the wild gods fell for the initial trap, the rest of the Vandal and Swordmaiden mechs went into action by throwing a bunch of hastily-fabricated gas grenades into the midst of the dwarf tribe that ran after their befuddled gods.

No matter if the dwarves consisted of warriors, workers or the underclass, the mechs threw their grenades in the vicinity of all of them without much concern for precision.

This sometimes led to unfortunate accidents as the cow-sized gas grenades splattered half-a-dozen dwarfs and godling mounts in the way. More than a

hundred dwarves died of accidents like this while others received severe injuries and bled out while the gas dispersing from the grenades started to work their magic.

Within twenty minutes, every dwarf except for a couple of inconsequential stragglers succumbed to the intoxicating gas released by those grenades.

"Alright, they're knocked out for at least half a day! Let's get to business!"

With the entire dwarf tribe neutralized, they posed no threat as the initial mechs secured the site around the unconscious wild gods. They began to install makeshift restraints on the sleeping wild gods.

Unlike with Qilanxo, the Flagrant Swordmaidens did not intend to enter into a cooperation with these beasts. In addition to being driven by instincts, these beasts also weren't as strong as the sacred gods. It was too much trouble to accommodate them when they didn't offer much in return.

As a couple of mechs went around to poke at the directionless mounts and other possessions of the dwarves, three entire mech companies arrived to add further restraints to the wild gods. They buried the three exobeasts with so much junk that they couldn't even lift themselves to their feet if they wanted!

"Alright, that's enough! Let's set up the site for the lab geeks!"

The fast transports carrying the first batch of exobiologists and lab gear came next. The exobiologists eagerly ran towards the unconscious wild gods and started to measure their physical state. Their primary job was to confirm the wild gods wouldn't wake up anytime soon!

"Inject Subject 3 with a quarter dose of sedatives! His body is resisting the substances laced in the candy bar!"

As the exobiologists and researchers buzzed over their captives, the fast transport carrying Ves arrived as well. He stepped out and made way as a bunch of security officers headed to the restrained wild gods and climbed up into the palanquins to secure the vitally important dwarf riders and their retinue.

Ves had a lot of uses for them all. "Be sure to handle them carefully! Don't injure them! Be careful with the dwarf kids, they make for the best hostages!"

At some point, Qilanxo finally caught up after the fast transports. When her lumbering form emerged into view, she halted when she saw how much restraints the Flagrant Swordmaidens piled up against the wild gods.

She also looked around and saw no trace of fighting at all. Though Captain Orfan and Lieutenant Dise already told her that they managed to subdue the wild gods through a cheap trick, the sacred god simply couldn't believe it. The wild gods never conceded so easily! How could a piece of strange food subdue them at the same time?

Ves leisurely strolled to Qilanxo and slapped her gaping maw with his gauntleted palm. "Do you see now how we humans from beyond the vault of the stars wage war? We are far more advanced than the people and gods who are trapped on this underdeveloped planet. Do you believe us now? We are but a small extension of a vast, galaxy-spanning civilization. If not us, someone else will eventually stumble upon this planet and upend everyone who lives on it. It is not dishonorable that you have lost to us in battle, for we are invincible against any opponent except when it comes to ourselves!"

Even if Qilanxo didn't release any roars in response, Ves could keenly tell that her shock put her into an impressionable state. Her view of how the world worked completely turned upside down.

Though she didn't think the Flagrant Swordmaidens were all that formidable, this show of strength forced her to reevaluate their strength!

Ves left her side when he finished saying his piece. He felt confident his words wormed their way into her complex mind. After several months of regular visits, he knew that she was just as smart as any human. Her only deficiency was that like all the natives on this planet, her perspective never reached beyond the astral winds.

Nobody on this planet remembered their old heritage!

"Well, that's something to figure out later when we actually reach the damn Starlight Megalodon. First, we've got some studies to perform." He grinned.

While the heavy transports and their escorts slowly made way to the capture site, the exobiologists already started implanting the wild gods with numerous scanners, sensors and other devices that monitored their body condition.

Due to several uncertainties, Ves pushed to perform the first experiment as soon as possible. This way, the beast rider project would finally be able to gather concrete, relevant data that would help him design a safe and functional beast rider neural interface.

"Wake up Subject 3!" He instructed the exobiologists. "Make sure to wake him up gradually, and keep him weak. I don't want this beast to get ferocious."

With that done, Ves boarded a small transport converted into a holding cell for dwarf captives. The dwarf chieftain and the two other dwarf riders each resided in their own cells. Their wives, children, bodyguards and other followers had been stuffed into the other cells.

After inspecting the prisoners, Ves picked out Subject 3's dwarf rider as well as what appeared to be one of his children, a cute dwarf boy who was about four standard years old if the exobiologists judged correctly.

"Bring them both to the interrogation room. Make sure you restrain the dwarf rider with restraints strong enough to hold back an exoskeleton armor suit. These bonded riders may have gained a lot of physical enhancements from their wild god partners."

"Actually, their physiques are hardly different from a well-fed dwarf warrior." One of the resident doctors in charge of monitoring the health of the prisoners remarked. "Although I've only performed some cursory tests, their muscle density and other properties don't diverge at all from the norm."

Ves frowned. "Maybe it only happens when they are actively engaging their man-beast connection. Whatever the case, it's better to be safe than sorry. I want full precautions! When it comes to wild gods, you never know what shenanigans you might encounter!"

A pair of security officers roughly dragged the unconscious dwarf rider from his cell and bolted him down onto a custom-built chair. Various restraints bolted him down into his seat and left him completely unable to exert any strength!

To be somewhat safe, he also ordered the dwarf child to be cuffed and restrained as well.

"Alright, doc, wake them both."

The doctor injected a simple counteragent into the bloodstreams of both dwarves. They woke up within minutes.

After groggily trying to ascertain the situation, the dwarf rider finally noticed his precarious straits. His eyes widened as his savage mind rapidly made several observations.

He woke up in a completely unknown metal chamber!

Only the blessed people possessed such an abundant amount of worked metal!

His wild god was nowhere to be found!

When he stretched out his mind, he couldn't find the mind of his wild god anywhere in the vicinity!

Tall figured garbed in completely foreign metal shells kept him under guard!

One of them stood straight across the room holding his youngest son!

His youngest son!

The dwarf rider angrily roared like a god while trying to shake off the restraints. It didn't work! His robust dwarf body simply couldn't break the advanced alloys meant to secure the likes of exoskeleton armor!

The wildling roared helplessly as his son slowly woke up as well and cried when he saw all the strangeness around him. Even though the dwarves were savage and hardy species, their juveniles were as small and vulnerable as human children.

Ves smiled in satisfaction. At the very least, the dwarf rider was human enough to care for his family.

"Alright, you dwarf." He began. "Let us have a little talk among ourselves."

The raging dwarf didn't register his words. The savage looked at Ves and the other forms and instantly mistook them as the blessed people.

There was no chance of dialogue between the blessed and the cursed people! Both of them hated each other as if it had been carved into their genes. Only one of their subraces would reign supreme on this planet one day!

Ves ignored the mindless rage and calmly took a seat on the chair opposite of the table.

He prepared a handful of props for this meeting. He fabricated them a few days ago within a couple of minutes. They didn't look very fancy, but it was pointless for Ves to use his considerable craftsmanship to convey his meaning to a dwarf.

"I know a savage like you can't understand standard language, so I'll use these props to illustrate what I want."

He first picked up the largest metal figurine, the one that resembled a wild god. It lacked the palanquin on top, but that didn't matter.

"This is Subject 3. Suppose that it's your bonded wild god." Ves then picked up the figurine of a typical dwarf warrior. "This is you. Let's call you Dwarf 3 for convenience. I'm not interested in learning your real name in your unique, tribal tongue. What I want you to do is to bring you out to Subject 3 and establish your man-machine connection. I want you two to bond in full view of our instruments so I can gather lots of data about this connection."

Ves crudely placed the figurine of the dwarf on the back of the wild gold model and waved them around as if he was treating them as his toys.

The captive dwarf rider stared at Ves as if he understood nothing.

"You don't have to understand." He smirked. "Because if you don't cooperate, bad things will happen to the people you care about."

He dropped the two figurines and picked up the figurine of one of the smallest dwarves. Ves pointed it at the frightened dwarf child who begged his dad to save him with his crying eyes.

"This doll is your little kid. We will hang onto to that brat, any any other people we found in your palanquin. As long as you cooperate, your kid will stay safe. If you remain stubborn like your kind tends to be, then I'll have to enact some disciplinary measures. Since we already know that punishment won't work on a crazy warrior like you, I'll have to take out your punishment on your little kid."

Ves carefully manipulated his armor-clad fingers and snapped one of the arms of the dwarf child figurine.

"Oops."

Even though the dwarf didn't understand his words at all, the meaning Ves conveyed was more than clear to the savage. The dwarf father released an incredibly angry roar and fought back twice as hard against his restraints.

"You can lash out all you want, but that won't help you save your child."

To illustrate his meaning, Ves held out the dwarf child figurine and snapped off its head. Although it was a trivial gesture, the ominous message it conveyed instantly sobered up the dwarf.

"Will you cooperate with my experiments now?"

#### Chapter 835 Drunk on Data

After successfully conveying the meaning of his requests to Dwarf 3, he ordered the security officers to take him out to Subject 3. By now, the captured and heavily-restrained wild god figured out his awful state and roared in anger as he tried but failed to shake loose.

Not to mention the incredible pile of restraints, several mech companies of ranged and melee mechs constantly stood guard around the captives. If any of the wild gods showed signs of breaking their restraints, they could easily club the wild god silly through sheer numbers.

The abundant amount of mechs surrounding his captive form eventually intimidated Subject 3 into calming down. Even though he never shed all of his feral instincts, he still recognized that he was only wasting his energy at this moment.

When Dwarf 3 came out of one of the transports and got dragged towards Subject 3, the both of them somehow sensed each other's presence. Subject 3 roared in anger again, while Dwarf 3 started talking gibberish that the AI

translators hadn't been able to make sense of yet. Every single dwarf tribe developed a unique language, giving the Flagrant Swordmaidens a lot of headaches if they wanted to interrogate the captives!

Fortunately, Ves wasn't interested in hearing what the dwarf captives had to say. He only needed them to demonstrate their abilities and perform some other experiments.

Ves and the beast rider project already drafted up an extensive sequence of testing and experimentations beforehand. Now that they finally got their hands on some wild gods and dwarf riders, they eagerly rushed to prep the beasts and dwarf rider. They already poked every part of the wild god, inserting monitors, sensors, bugs and other devices into his thick and resilient flesh.

Nothing about the creature remained a secret after being stuffed with so many sensors!

Dwarf 3 received the same treatment, though a bit more delicately as all of the foreign materials weren't exactly good for the captive's health. The captive didn't always cooperate, and the security officers sometimes had a hard time in trying to subdue the raging dwarf's motions as he resisted the insertion of all of the objects into his body.

"Bear with it. This won't take long." Ves said to the side, though Dwarf 3 likely hadn't understand his words.

It didn't matter. He lied anyway.

Once Dwarf 3 got hooked up with all of the sensors, they forcefully placed him onto the back of the beast. The researchers got rid of the wooden palanquin constructed atop Subject 3's back and replaced it with a repurposed mech cockpit that Ves cobbled together himself. While it didn't carry a neural interface, he did manage to stuff it with even more sensors.

There could never be too much sensors! With all the weird stuff surrounding the man-beast connection, Ves wanted to gather as much data as possible. Even the lack of any notable data was a data point in itself, as the absence of any abnormalities either signified that the phenomenon was too strange to be measured by their low-quality sensors, or they could rule out something of this nature happening.

All of this sounded complicated, but Ves basically employed so many sensors in the hopes of understanding how the natives and wild gods managed to establish a man-beast connection without the use of machines.

While it was possible to connect the minds of a mech pilot to a mech through a wireless connection, this could only be done through the use of a sophisticated neural interface designed for the purpose!

There was no way the planet's organisms evolved this function naturally. Their abnormal brain structure somehow managed to replicate the functioning of advanced mech equipment, and Ves simply didn't know how.

Ves may be a mech designer, but his knowledge on neural interfaces could only be described as shallow and patchy. As for the exobiologists who specialized in studying alien biology, none of them specialized in neurology or the study of brains.

Therefore, these tests held an unprecedented amount of importance to the beast rider project. With actual data in their hands, they no longer had to work with educated guesswork.

"Begin the first test!"

They let the dwarf engage his remote connection with the wild god. Both of them became subdued all of a sudden when the connection established.

Ves had retreated to a portable lab where the experts of the beast rider project all sat behind a bank of terminals and control panels. They monitored

every incoming sensor readings. Already, some of them gained some insights, while others had their theories vindicated.

"This is incredible! The readings on the man-beast connection is functionally similar to the readings of a typical man-machine connection! They share a common root!"

"This proves that at least one exobiologist from the Starlight Megalodon designed both the natives and the god species for this purpose in mind! And they collaborated with a mech designer to design this organic neural interface structure!"

All of them had already guessed as much, but the hard data confirmed their judgement.

As more and more data poured in, Ves smirked even wider as he already foresaw his own research advance by leaps and bounds. Previously, he mostly worked blindly in the dark. Now, enough of his surroundings had been illuminated for him to establish a firm direction.

The difference this first test made already made the entire ordeal worth the effort!

Of course, now that they had some tribal wild gods and dwarf riders on their hands, the experiments didn't end there. After the first test came the second test. After the second test came the third test. And so on. In fact, the beast rider project scheduled over two-hundred different tests, each of which paid attention to different aspects.

Now that the testing and experimentation came on track, the researchers maddingly ran through the tests as fast as possible. No matter what kind of junk data they received, the data chips stored all of them for later processing and analysis. They gathered so much data that they would probably be able to

fill the storage contents of hundreds of data chips by the time they had their fill.

That still wasn't enough!

Some of the researchers even giggled as they saw how much valuable data they harvested. After more than two months of working on conjecture and vague clues derived from vague sensor readings, they now received a flood of precise, accurate and varied data, enough to drown their processors for a couple of months!

"More! Give us more!"

"Damn it, the dwarf has stopped the connection! That lazy captive! Get him back to work!"

The dwarf captive hated being directed like a puppet to his captives, but whenever he became recalcitrant, the security officers brought forth his son and slapped the kid around a little bit. Every time the dwarf child cried horribly, the father gritted his teeth and surrendered to the circumstances.

Its savage mind knew that as long as he cooperated, he and his family would be able to stay alive! It wouldn't be too late to turn the tables on his captives afterwards!

As Ves almost went drunk at the sheer amount of data pouring in, Chief Dakkon entered the lab while the fifteenth test started running.

In order to develop his translation filter for his beast rider neural interface, he needed to gather a large variety of readings associated with many different actions. Simple acts such as turning around the head or releasing an intimidating roar all came accompanied by a different set of thought patterns.

In essence, right now Ves was attempting to build a dictionary of alien thought patterns. Once the dictionary held enough entries, Ves could let some AIs loose on the data and fill up the rest of the dictionary.

"Having fun, Ves?"

"I sure am, chief." He grinned. "Encountering this large beast tribe is a windfall for our research projects."

"Well, I'm happy for you. You'll finally be able to get out of your deadlock after gathering all of this data. I just wanted to tell you that the god crystal project wants to get a turn with the wild gods as well. Don't wear them out too fast. You're not the only ones who are eyeing these test subjects."

Ves smiled dubiously at the chief engineer. "Aren't you going to nag about me about how much ethical boundaries that we're violating right now? What we're doing right now doesn't exactly comply with the rules."

"If you wanted to pull off something risky with the mech pilots, then someone needs to pull you back. However, it's just some dwarves and some wild gods that are at risk of injury right now. Considering that you are performing these experiments for the good of Captain Orfan and Lieutenant Dise, I can accept the unpleasanties surrounding these experiments. It's not as if the god crystal project has some clean experiments in mind either."

Some of the chief's reluctance still bled into his voice.

Ves suspected that the man had already started to see him as unhinged, so he quickly provided some platitudes. "It's not that I don't recognize how wrong and repulsive these experiments are back in civilized space, but the key point is that we aren't there right now. We're right in a forbidden region of space that's filled with danger and mystery. Uncovering these mysteries should be one of our highest priorities. Only through understanding can we blow away the fog hiding the underlying truth behind the circumstances on this planet."

"I don't disagree with you, but..." The chief hesitated. "I'm afraid we are losing our souls here. The longer we stay on Seven, the more we descend into savagery. It's already happened to the blessed people, not to mention the cursed people. Aren't you worried how we'll look like six months from now? A year from now? Two years from now? Perhaps we'll be unrecognizable by the time we reach the Starlight Megalodon!"

Ves wanted to palm his face. The chief was worried about this?!

"There's no question that we are changing." He responded lightly, as if he didn't feel the need to be concerned about it. "From the perspective of civilized space, we are indeed descending into savagery. Yet I don't see that as a bad thing. We are adapting to the environment. Savagery may have degenerated the natives, but it also allowed them to survive in this brutal heavy gravity world. Therefore, adapting to local circumstances isn't anything bad. The key is that we shouldn't be too short-sighted and lose our remaining advantages. Our mechs and our research capacity are our strongest weapons in this mission."

Chief Dakkon chuckled. "What should I have expected? I knew you'd respond in such a fashion. You never regret anything, do you?"

Did he? Ves contemplated the question seriously. Out of all of the actions he performed and all of the decisions he made so far, did he truly regretted anything?

He recognized that he could have been less impulsive and a bit more careful at some points. One of his biggest regrets was when he fabricated and used an unsecure comm while being stranded on Detemen IV back in the mission to raid the Vesia Kingdom's Detemen System.

That mistake probably led a lot of unsuspecting Vandals to their deaths due to the surprise artillery bombardment called down on their hidden position.

Still, what was the point of crying over spilt milk? As long as he survived and learned his lessons, there was no point in lamenting any further about his many errors.

Keep going forward! Ves had many goals in mind, and he couldn't afford to stop and look back for long.

"All the things I do, I do for a reason." He eventually remarked. "To regret is to imply that I want to turn back time to undo my mistakes. I don't want that. I don't want to turn back at all. Whatever mistakes I've made and sins I've incurred in the past, my future accomplishments will wash them all away. I'm certain of this belief."

Ves clenched his gauntleted fingers into a fist to emphasize his conviction. In some sense, he became a true Vandal at that moment. No matter what shenanigans they pulled off, as long as they completed the mission, anything was permissible!

Meanwhile, Chief Dakkon shook his head in disappointment. The lesson he tried to impart to the younger mech designer completely fell flat.

### Chapter 836 Grand Design

The testing and experiments went on for days. Scientists and researchers started rotating as they all couldn't stay awake, though they eagerly wished to as they already started interpreting tiny portions of the incoming data that kept pouring into their data chips.

Even Ves couldn't stay present. So much data passed through his eyes that his brains stuffed themselves with irrelevant data. Even he needed some rest in order to flush his mind of junk.

As Subject 3 and Dwarf 3 both grew weary after repeated testing, they sedated them both and woke up Subject 2 and Dwarf 2 to continue their raft of tests. Ves didn't even need to step in as the security officers copied his trick

with the figurines and successfully established interspecies communications with another captive dwarf.

The meaning they conveyed was very simple. Either Dwarf 2 cooperated with the experiments, or he would get to see his mate and kids tortured to death!

Warriors or not, the dwarf riders were still human enough to succumb to their protective instincts.

"Perform the second iteration of tests!"

The beast rider project performed the exact same tests on Subject 2 and Dwarf 2 as with the previous test subjects. This allowed them to confirm if something remained the same or changed due to different circumstances. This in turn increased the reliability of their final efforts.

For example, the translation filter that Ves wanted to complete with the help of this data wouldn't spaz out all of a sudden due to a mistranslation.

After making sure his subordinates were more than capable enough to perform the testing in his stead, Ves left them in charge and paid a visit to Qilanxo.

The exobeast rested within view of the captured wild gods. She witnessed the cruel and intensive testing and experimentation with a pitiless expression. If it was up to her, she would have attacked and killed the wild gods directly before proceeding to gorge upon their flesh!

Therefore, to see them and their dwarf riders dancing to the tune of the Flagrant Swordmaidens satisfied her sadistic tendencies.

Even though they shared the same race, a sacred god like Qilanxo never sympathised with the wild gods! The two hated each other to such an extent that they would gleefully see each other extinct.

This was despite the fact that most of the unremarkable offspring of the sacred gods tended to be godlings and wild gods themselves!

Ves actually found Qilanxo's callousness towards her wilder cousins to be rather strange. Why were the sacred gods so hostile to the wild gods and vice versa?

Their conflict strangely paralleled the hostility between the blessed and cursed people. The only difference was that their power balance had been flipped upside down.

"The blessed people are weaker than the wildlings, who are naturally able to survive outside the cities due to their extreme genetic modifications. As for the god species, the sacred gods are notably stronger because they are able to derive energy directly from the astral winds, while the wild gods can only make do with what scraps are left from eating their prey."

Despite the considerable strength of the sacred gods, Ves did not feel so optimistic about their future. The only reason the sacred gods held an edge was because the wild gods and the wildlings hadn't mastered the secret behind the god crystals.

Once the dwarf tribes with bonded wild gods managed to crack the secret behind the god crystals, the power parity between the two divisions disappeared!

The number of sacred gods and blessed people had always been constrained by the limited number of cities they controlled. The wild gods and the natives stranded out in the wilds faced no such population constraints.

Eventually, the future of Aeon Corona VII belonged to the side with the greater numbers, as they adapted the best to the local environment!

Though the intervention of outsiders likely derailed that outcome. The presence of the Flagrant Swordmaidens already caused the societal

development of every group of natives they came in touch with to diverge from their original paths.

Even Qilanxo herself no longer believed she was an apex creature of the planet. She realized she set her sights too narrow. An entire galaxy existed beyond the vault of the gods!

"Sometimes I wonder who's the mastermind behind setting up this planet in this fashion." He casually remarked to Qilanxo. "It's like Aeon Corona VII is like a giant playground. The experiments we're performing on our captives at the moment is nothing compared to the massive effort that's been put into engineering everything alive on this planet to conform to an unknown grand design."

The more Ves learned about this Super Earth, the more he recognized it as a grand design.

He did not use the phrase grand design lightly. The mere addition of the word 'grand' evoked a sense of majesty and weight. Very rarely did mech designers describe their own products as grand designs. Normally, only station designers and shipwrights who designed capital ships had the right to describe their products as grand.

The only notable instance where mech designers deliberately drew on this phrase was when the Rubarthans developed the massive juggernaut mechs.

Even then, most industry insiders considered the juggernauts to be a failed invention. Though their might was considerable, they also painted a massive target on their slow-moving backs. Any ship from orbit could throw down a couple of artificial meteorites and completely obliterate the sitting duck of a juggernaut with ease under normal circumstances.

The story of the juggernaut mechs reminded Ves that not all grand designs succeeded in their goals.

The question that lingered on his mind was whether Aeon Corona VII's engineered ecosystem served its purpose or not. What was the point of engineering the god species as organic mechs and turning the natives into organic mech pilots with built-in organic neural interface functionality?

Qilanxo turned her gaze from the wild gods to Ves who stood in front of her without fear and roared a series of sounds.

"You're not afraid of the changes that might come from our intervention? You think that life goes on regardless of what disaster might happen?"

Qilanxo thumped the ground with her tail, startling a few of the surrounding Vandals and Swordmaidens.

Ves chuckled however. "Seems like you are much wiser than I."

He continued to babble with her about esoteric subjects. It didn't matter what he talked about. He enjoyed spending time with Qilanxo. As an older sacred god, she was both wise and naive. She never resorted to lies or deception, and that made her a refreshing conversation partner.

If he spoke to any human, no matter if it was Ketis, Talkative Jimmy, Chief Dakkon or Captain Byrd, he always had to craft his words carefully.

It was different with Qilanxo. Ves liked to view her like a talking mech, but in truth he treated her as something much greater.

What kind of exobiologist managed to engineer a creature like Qilanxo?

If the rest of the galaxy ever learned of what kind of exobeasts and natives dwelled on Aeon Corona VII, they'd go mad. The explosive implications of the grand design that the Flagrant Swordmaidens slowly uncovered might even lead to a tussle between the MTA and the CFA!

If such an epic clash occurred, where did that leave the natives?

"It's too bad you're too heavy to be lifted out of planet. If we could, we would have wanted to bring you out as a companion."

Qilanxo roared lightly. This was her home! She would never agree to leaving it! Humans like Ves already ruled the stars. A sacred god like her would only be an interloper in human space.

He spent an hour in Qilanxo's company. Even if the topics he talked with her weren't very profound, he still felt as if he cleansed his mind somehow.

It said something about him that he felt the most comfortable with Qilanxo.

"That reminds me, I should check up Ketis as well."

By now, the heavy transports arrived in the vicinity and made camp. Many Vandals became occupied with getting a handle on the dwarf tribe the mechs subdued with the gas grenades.

Out of a lingering sense of humanity, the Flagrant Swordmaidens decided to corral them into makeshift holding pens instead of killing them outright. This drew many Vandals and Swordmaidens from their routine jobs, making the camp seem much emptier than usual.

Ves didn't take too much notice of the quiet and headed towards the workshops. He entered one of them and managed to track down Ketis.

Two months earlier, she always adopted a stressed and weary expression. Getting a handle on the Vandal mech technicians proved to be as difficult and painful as pulling out her own tooth.

Nowadays, her posture and expression betrayed a sense of ease. It was as if everything that happened in the workshops fell under her complete control. Nothing happened without her permission.

"How is it going here, Ketis? Having any trouble lately?"

She shrugged. "Nothing but the usual is going on. Most of the breakdowns we're seeing lately don't require much expertise to repair. All I'm doing right now is making sure the mech technicians don't slack off."

"Are the chiefs fermenting any opposition lately?"

"Nah. Those lessons you taught a while ago still haunts them to this day. They're not really intimidated by me anymore. Instead, they're deadly afraid of crossing you. They think that if they do something that forces you to respond, they might not survive the next time they're tossed inside Qilanxo's maw."

Ves laughed. "I may have gone overboard there. I'm glad they still take it to heart."

"It's damn troublesome, you know!" Ketis puffed. "Some of the chiefs are so traumatized they've basically turned into good-for-nothings. They're hardly doing their jobs as chief technicians!"

"How did you deal with the problem?"

"I pointed my finger at some of the brighter mech technicians and promoted them to unofficial deputy chief technicians. I hadn't been able to convince the Vandal pencil pushers to confirm the ranks, but all the crew know who to listen to whenever they need instructions."

"This can't go on." Ves said. "Either the chiefs need to sober up, or the replacements you've designated have to fill in their shoes."

"The problem is that the deputy chiefs don't match the criteria to be promoted to chiefs. You Vandals are really stubborn about possessing the right qualifications. It's much simpler over at the Swordmaidens. You're either the best or not. Even if you fall short, as long as there's no one better, you're still able to land the job."

Bureaucracy became a hindrance in this case. Personally, Ves was on her side, but he understood why the Vandals became so obstinate about this issue. Rules and regulations existed for a reason, and while he liked to ignore them when they became a hindrance to him, he couldn't do so all the time.

Neither could anyone else.

"There's something I need to mention to you, Ves." She said. "The rate of breakdowns is increasing. The difference is small, but it's getting bigger and bigger every day. I approached some of the engineers one day and they said the reason why is because spacetime gets freakier the closer we get to our destination. Is that true?"

Ves was familiar with that theory. "It's true. The astral winds are a lot more turbulent closer to the source. Once they reach the other side of the planet, they smooth out a bit as the higher-dimensional get dispersed into space."

"Well, the engineers and the other nerds performed some calculations over the last two months. Did you know what they found out? They extrapolated the increase in breakdowns and believe it will increase drastically once we get within a thousand kilometers of the Starlight Megalodon."

That was new. While some believed that something like this might happen, everyone who adhered to this possibility always lacked proof of their assertions.

But if the number crunchers came to this conclusion based on solid data, then that was an entirely different matter. "What are their conclusions?"

"The eggheads believe the distortions will become so bad, that it's impossible for any mech to operate within a hundred kilometers of the crash site!"

If this was true, then this was a massive bombshell to the Flagrant Swordmaidens. If not a single mech could remain operational near the battleship, how would they be able to complete their mission?

## Chapter 837 Organic Solution

The issue concerning the increasing rate of breakdowns and mechanical failures threatened to derail the entire expedition. While the engineers only made an uncertain prediction what might happen if they came close to the elusive battleship, Ves believed that this might very well become a serious problem!

He sought of Chief Dakkon to discuss the issue. They met at the workshop.

"Ves. What did you call me for?"

"Is it true that the rate of breakdowns will increase to such an extent that it's impossible to operate a mech near the Starlight Megalodon?"

The chief's face grew serious. "That's a possible outcome. We've extrapolated this possibility from the existing data. It's not entirely set in stone that mechs won't work in the vicinity. After all, hasn't the battleship herself shown signs of life?"

That was true. Otherwise, how could she have been functional enough to detect something going on in orbit and launch an antimatter torpedo straight in the middle of a fleet in the midst of bombarding the surface?

"Still, that's the Starlight Megalodon you're talking about." Ves retorted. "As the source of all the unnatural phenomena around Seven, I'm sure she's an exception to the rule. It would have been a very bad thing if she became affected by the same technology-corroding effects from the astral winds that is spewing out of her leaking FTL drives."

"This is also why I don't dare to take too much stock in this prediction yet. The situation near the site might be very different from our calculations."

If the Starlight Megalodon became subjected to this very same effect, then how could her FTL drives still be releasing gouts of astral winds? They had to

remain somewhat functional, and they did indeed for an extremely lengthy amount of time.

Therefore, the clues pointed out that even if various pieces of technology would stop working if they came close, some people developed a means to circumvent this effect.

Ves hummed in thought. "I wonder how the battleship managed to stay working. There has to be a way for us to shield our mechs and machinery from the breakdown effect."

Both of them brainstormed for a few minutes, but neither Ves or Dakkon could come up with an answer.

However, Ves did come up with a possible alternative. "Only machines are affected, right? So far, none of the doctors or exobiologists ever gave out an alert concerning the dangers to our health. What if this extends to the god species as well?"

"You mean..."

"Maybe this is intentional. Haven't you ever thought about the absence of any functional technology among the natives? Why did they voluntarily return to the stone age or bronze age? Why haven't the natives inherited any of the advantaged knowledge of their ancestors?"

"This is still a far-fetched idea, Ves."

"Yet out of all the possibilities, it makes the most sense!" Ves declared with fervor. "Why turn Aeon Corona VII into a giant experiment? Why engineer the god species into organic mechs analogues and why modify the genes of the blessed and cursed people into organic mech pilots? It's because only non-mechanical entities are able to get close to the Starlight Megalodon!"

"You know what this theory implies, right? Those who terraformed this planet and seeded it with the god species and the natives likely come from a different faction than the one who is still in control of the Starlight Megalodon!"

A great story must be behind this separation, if it existed at all. Ves strongly believed in his intuition, which told him something like this must have happened. This might not have been the only division among the original crew.

So many contradictions must have emerged after the crash. Officers against enlisted. Researchers against soldiers. Those who gave up and wanted to settle against those who wanted to work on towards an escape.

The Flagrant Swordmaidens only gathered fragmented clues during their travels so far, but this revelation may have been the first big secret they might have stumbled upon. It made too much sense to Ves!

However, Chief Dakkon didn't entirely seem willing to abandon everything they brought to complete the mission. "Even if the Starlight Megalodon is hard to get at, I don't believe it's impossible for us to develop a solution. Before we go all gung-ho on taming sacred gods and raise a beast rider regiment, we should conduct an extensive investigation."

"I agree." Ves nodded. After all, they couldn't completely put their faith in the data they gathered so far. "However, we shouldn't be too complacent either. Now that we know that we might need to depend on taming the god species, we should place more emphasis on the beast rider project. If possible, we should contemplate on adding other sacred gods to our roster."

"Do you think sacred gods are so easy to obtain?" Chief Dakkon snorted.

"We've traveled very far these last two months. We'll almost be passing by the last ancient city before we cross into the storm lands. We don't know what's hidden there, but the odds of encountering sacred gods for us to subdue is

rather low. So if we want to obtain more god beasts, we either have to lower our standards and go for the wild gods, or go attack an ancient city."

Ves grimaced. "I don't think Captain Byrd or any of the other mech officers will be eager to attack an ancient city. It's a politically sensitive matter."

No matter how far removed they were from the CFA, the blessed people that inhabited the ancient city still shared an undeniable heritage from the formidable organization. They had the blood of CFA officers running through their veins!

Even if more than a hundred generations went past, the CFA still took care of their own! They were notoriously famous for protecting the families and dependents of their active servicemen.

While the Vandals had the right to protect themselves if the natives came looking for trouble, hence why they dared to defend against Pairixan and his goons, it would be a different matter entirely if they barged into an ancient city!

In the end, the two hadn't been able to come up with a solution. They parted on uncertain terms, each of them burdened with future troubles.

Ves looked in the direction the expedition traveled towards. As long as they marched for a couple more weeks, they'd cross over the stormy side of the planet, which the men nicknamed the storm lands.

Once they crossed into the storm lands, they'd be completely cut off from the fleet. Not only wouldn't they be able to obtain supplies from the transports and shuttles that periodically descended from orbit, they also wouldn't be able to exchange any news either.

The fleet and their spaceborn mech escorts might be ambushed and destroyed one day, and the ground forces wouldn't even have a single clue!

Ves sighed for the umpteenth time. "If only our quantum entanglement nodes still worked."

That also reminded him of the strange Tzianti crystal he once used. Would alternative means of communication still work?

Several days passed by. After making the rounds in the camp, Ves returned to the test site and continued to supervise the experiments. The beast rider project gathered so much data that they wouldn't know what to do with ninety-five percent of it. That didn't matter though since they had data chips to spare. If they ever ran short, Ves would just visit the workshop and fabricate a batch of hundred chips at a time.

The only problem was that he botched the production several times. The breakdown effect started to take effect on microcomponents as well. When it came to the fabrication of extremely tiny but sophisticated chips, a lot of things had to go right. Even a single minor error could lead to spoiling half a batch!

And in fact, this happened far more often than Ves was comfortable with. What this did mean?

Fabricating replacement parts might take longer and wasted more resources. While the Vandals could still recycle some of their botched parts, it took a lot of time and effort to reclaim the resources, and for some parts such as armor plating it was way too hard to separate all of the substances structured together into extremely resilient forms.

Nonetheless, life went on. As the beast rider project ran through the data chips, the god crystal project got their turn next.

They had a lot of plans in store, the most important of which was to attempt to embed a god crystal into the hide of a beast and see what happened!

Due to the risks involved with this operation, the god crystal project members approached it with an abundant amount of caution. Their slow progress bored

Ves to tears, so he quickly left and started to process the data he gathered along with the rest of the beast rider project team.

"Now that we've gathered all the data that we need and more, I hope you can deliver some actual results." Ves stated. "In two weeks, I hope to finish a working prototype of a beast rider neural interface!"

Ves couldn't possibly process the data by himself. Though some of the data was incomprehensible to anyone but him, all the other experts all excelled in some areas. Ves trusted them to analyze certain portions of data and deliver succinct reports to him.

Through reading these condensed results and making use of the key data held within, Ves hoped to progress his stalled project by leaps and bounds!

In fact, in the first couple of days, his progress hadn't been very much. He had to navigate through the data and process them into useful forms.

Only a week after he started with the job did he obtain some progress. With Ves and the other experts delivering their first results, a lot of uncertainties about the project cleared up.

He made use of his gains to complete the so-called translation filter and finish the specifications of his beast rider neural interface.

Over the course of several days, he developed several variations of the neural interface, each of them differing in one vital area or another. Ves wasn't sure which one worked best or at all, so he had no choice but to develop several variants in the hopes of getting it right at least once.

In the meantime, the god crystal project began to show some results as well. While they failed to get a wild god to integrate with any of the god crystals the Vandal researchers embedded them with, they did learn a lot.

For one thing, a grown wild god wouldn't be able to draw any power from the god crystals. For some reason, their godling offspring needed to be embedded with small crystals from young, when their bodies were still relatively uncontaminated by intermediate energies.

Once a young godling began to eat the local meat, they became contaminated by the intermediate energy and matter the animals used to ingest from the environment. This polluted the godling and locked it into the growth path of a wild god.

Ves, Chief Dakkon and Dr. Tillman gathered at the testing site to discuss the results. Due to the invasive experiments, Subject 1 and Subject 2 succumbed. Only Subject 3 remained alive.

As for their dwarf riders? Since the Vandals had no more use for Dwarf 1 and Dwarf 2, they executed the useless bastards and their entire family and dependents. They didn't want the survivors to go on a revenge spree after being let loose. That was just silly.

"Very interesting." Chief Dakkon said. "What does this mean, exactly?"

Dr. Tillman summed up her findings. "It means the sacred gods are the only ones who can birth more sacred gods. A wild god or their offspring are marked with intermediate particles from the start, which is a lower class of energy from higher-dimensional particles. The only sacred gods that emerge are the children their parents decide to invest in. The offspring that fail to meet their criteria are either killed or left abandoned in the wild to take their chances. If they're lucky, they end up growing into wild gods after a century of growth and struggle."

"No wonder the wild gods hate the sacred gods." Ves remarked with a snort.

## Chapter 838 Breakdown Effec

When the subject of the alarming increase in the rate of breakdowns came up in the next staff meeting, everyone became alarmed.

"Is this true?!"

"How can we still contest if our mechs don't work anymore?"

"We can send our armed Vandals and Swordmaidens in on foot!"

"You daft idiot! With what weapons?! Our comms, combat armor and firearms won't work anymore! What are we going to fight with?! Our fists?!"

"The Swordmaidens will likely take to that environment like fish in water." Someone joked half-seriously. "Just think about it. Half of their individual combat prowess is tied to their genetic modifications and their razor-sharp swords. The breakdown effect won't affect their combat effectiveness at all!"

That put the Vandals to thought. If no one came up with a solution that counteracted the breakdown effect, then the Swordmaidens would likely reign supreme within a hundred kilometers of the Starlight Megalodon!

No technology!

No mechs!

No firearms!

Every rival force would be forced back to square one!

While that may please Lydia's Swordmaidens immensely, what about the Vandals? Almost none of their ranks boasted any genetic freaks. While Ves may be a rare exception, without commando training he'd be worse than useless in such a perilous deployment.

"As much as the Swordmaidens are capable in a battle on foot, don't forget that they have to depend on gravitic backpacks just like us." Ves pointed out.

"Or else, how can they possibly traverse and fight under six times the gravity of Old Earth? They'd barely be able to stand upright as it is, let alone walk!"

Right now, the entire reason why everyone wore hazard suits, piloting suits and combat armor all the time was because they could carry a gravitic backpack around at all times! If not for this modular accessory, if the antigrav fields around the camp broke down for whatever reason, they wouldn't instantly get crushed!

While that hadn't happened as of yet, as they slowly marched closer to the Starlight Megalodon, the breakdown effect slowly became much more pervasive, affecting any and all components within range.

Even the gadgets that Ves worked hard to develop previously suffered from the same risk.

Therefore, neither Ves or anyone else in the meeting wanted to give in to the circumstances. They really needed to find a solution for the breakdown effect!

"The ancient cities may have a solution." Chief Dakkon said. "When we visited Mulak and observed Samar with our spy drones, it has become clear that they developed a means to keep the gravity there at standard levels. How do they do that? Our current speculation is that they managed to do so through non-technological means, but what if they still retained a way to keep their antigrav modules functional? The ancient cities also make use of a power source somehow. We never really close to them to find out what those power sources look like and how they function."

The chief engineer pointed out a possible solution for them all. If they could enter an ancient city and study their old, durable devices, they might be able to solve the breakdown effect!

If the ancient cities didn't make use of mechanical technology and instead used something organic, then that was fine as well, because at least they'd be able to arm their infantrymen with organic antigrav modules or something.

Captain Byrd took this course of action seriously. "There's one more ancient city in the way before there won't be any in our route. If we decide we wish to engage with an ancient city, then now is the time to decide."

"The ancient cities are dangerous, ma'am!" A logistics officer said. "They're filled with superstitious savages and sacred gods that don't know the immensity of heaven and earth! We're bound to have a repeat of what happened at Samar if we approach them recklessly!"

Many Vandals agreed with that sentiment. The sacred gods that ruled over the city and the surrounding territory might take affront at the foreigners and go on the attack!

However, Captain Orfan saw an opportunity there. "Is it really so bad if the sacred gods go on the offensive? We'd have a valid excuse to defeat and capture them like we did with Qilanxo! If we can't use any mechs near the Starlight Megalodon, what about our tamed sacred gods? As long as we ride on a couple exobeasts, it would be the same as if we deployed mechs in an infantry battle!"

This sounded extremely attractive! Also, it sounded like something their rival forces might do as well!

"Remember that we aren't the only ones who have to deal with the breakdown effect. What if the pirates and Vesians who we know are on the surface are faced with the same problems? I bet you they'll turn on the natives and capture their powerful sacred gods for their own uses. They're the strongest weapon we can bring at the center of the crash site!"

More and more people argued in favor of approaching an ancient city. Either they could establish peaceful relations and trade for the things they wanted, or if negotiations failed they could simply take what they wanted by force in true Vandal style!

However, Captain Byrd and a couple of other conservative Vandals who felt burned when Pairixan came close to wiping out the Vandals deeply feared another confrontation with the city dwellers.

"Taking on an ancient city is no trivial issue. The reigning sacred god is always a powerhouse with the strength to suppress an entire region!"

"We still have Qilanxo!" Captain Orfan pointed out. "The big girl can act as our diplomat and interpreter! If the city folk see her first, they won't think have a strong as a reaction than if we present them with our mechs!"

The natives had never seen any mechs in their lives and always tended to see the worst in them. Rather than show up with something completely foreign on this planet, why not adopt some of the local customs and aesthetics, if only to present a familiar sight?

Trade and interaction did sometimes occur between the ancient cities.

However, sending out a captive with uncertain loyalties to be their spokesperson came with other risks. What if Qilanxo rebelled and sought refuge with the ancient city? Though she had largely been docile and cooperate among the Flagrant Swordmaidens, that was partially because she was surrounded by mechs at all times.

She had no hope of escape so far!

However, if Qilanxo came near to the ancient city, it wasn't out of the question that she might call on the assistance of its sacred gods.

An argument raged back and forth on whether to approach the ancient city at all, and if so, to come riding Qilanxo or piloting their mechs.

"Alright, that's enough! PIPE DOWN!" Captain Byrd forcefully halted the back-and-forth. "Obviously, this is a major decision that requires much more consideration. Let's table the issue for now. I'd like for some of you to take a step back and analyze the pros and cons of each option. I'll take these reports and confer with Commander Lydia on our decision. We have two days until we are scheduled to move out. Will our experiments with the captive wild gods be done by then?"

Chief Dakkon and Dr. Tillman nodded.

"Our experiments are almost done. Subject 3 is on his last legs. The bonded wild god won't last much longer, and Dwarf 3 is pretty much a vegetable at this point." Dakkon said.

"We have completed our dissection of Subject 1 remains." Dr. Tillman reported. "We can speed up our investigations of Subject 2's carcass and carve it into smaller pieces so we can perform our experiments on the move. The same goes for Subject 3 when he is at our disposal."

While they preferred to stay in a fixed location to perform their research, they couldn't afford to stall in place for long. They just had to be resigned with studying tissue samples in the mobile lab facilities aboard the heavy transports.

After the meeting, Ves didn't go back to the labs, but instead tracked down Talkative Jimmy for another status update.

During their occasional meetings, Ves and Jimmy became fairly familiar with each other. While neither would call each other a friend, they were firm acquaintances with shared interests.

"What's Venerable Xie up to these days?" Ves immediately asked.

"He's laying low like always." Jimmy replied in a casual tone as he took a draft of his drink. They met in the bar this time. "Something is different, though. He's getting annoyed at his own mech. The Pale Dancer is suffering from a lot more malfunctions than any other mech. It's driving his pet mech designer crazy!"

Ves smirked. "The Pale Dancer is a highly-advanced precision machine. It's ten times more sophisticated than a regular mech, and while all of its parts are fairly robust, all the cushioning can't do much against the all-pervasive breakdown effect."

In the intervening months, Venerable Xie hardly inducted more mech pilots into his circle. Instead, he wormed his way into the hearts of Miss Lisbeth Eta-Denmersken and her specialist crew.

Miss Lisbeth proved to be an easy mech designer to charm. Despite the conditioning that Ves forced her to go through, she couldn't help but go back to old habits.

Ves knew that this course of action was inevitable, and so didn't make any moves to stop it. If not her, then Venerable Xie would have wooed another mech designer.

At the very least, Miss Lisbeth didn't possess any exceptional capabilities other than her capability to work with expert mechs. Even then, the Pale Dancer was such a foreign mech to her that she needed years to become familiar with its design.

"I think Venerable Xie is making some moves behind the scenes. Strange stuff is happening around him. Word is starting to spread that this breakdown effect will only get worse when we get closer to the Starlight Megalodon. Is that true?" Jimmy asked carefully.

In order to make sure no one eavesdropped on their conversation, Ves quietly activated his signal jammer. He set it at low power in order to avoid drawing the attention of the rest of the bar.

"I just came out of a meeting discussing the very same thing. The news will spread among the rest soon enough I think. The point is that eventually breakdowns will happen so often that hardly anything will work for long. Within a range of a hundred kilometers, there's no way to field any mechs, because they won't even be able to activate. By then, the value of Venerable Xie and the Pale Dancer will certainly diminish."

Even if the Flagrant Swordmaidens couldn't find a solution to the breakdown effect, that didn't mean that their mechs became useless. Even if they sent Vandals and Swordmaidens to the crash site on foot, the remainder still needed to secure their escape route.

Ves expected that most of the mechs of the rival forces would be operating at the periphery. Perhaps the forces may decide to come to blows if they didn't think their infantrymen stood a chance!

"I don't presume to know what Venerable Xie is planning, but he is definitely preparing for something big." Jimmy said. "Something so drastic that he doesn't dare to pop out his head. He even curtailed his training sessions with his sycophants."

That sounded worrisome. Though the expert pilot didn't need to guide his group of cultivated mech pilots so often after instructing them for a while, it nevertheless indicated that Venerable Xie may truly be planning something nefarious!

"What do you really think, Jimmy? I don't believe you haven't thought of anything. Spill."

Jimmy gazed at Ves with a shifty expression. "I really don't want to presume. However, from my experience.. I don't expect anything good."

"Does Captain Byrd know?"

"She does. I'm not the only Vandal keeping my eye on our expert pilot. Still, Venerable Xie has been laying low for so long that it's hard to think he's up to something. She's distracted with other matters."

Compared to an increasingly acute problem like the breakdown effect, she had no time to go into other matters, particularly if they didn't show any signs of blowing up. Ves feared that Captain Byrd might be neglecting the dangers of keeping her attention away from the foreign expert pilot!

However, even if he suspected anything, what could he do? For over two months, he hadn't done anything because his hands were tied. He didn't even dare to come close to Venerable Xie in person. He also had no way of accessing the Pale Dancer to implement some changes because either Miss Lisbeth or the expert pilot himself hovered closely to the expert at all times!

#### **Chapter 839 Near Completion**

With the breakdown effect breathing down their necks and an expert pilot of uncertain loyalties in their midst, Ves foresaw looming disasters over the horizon.

The biggest problem with the latter was that few believed that Venerable Xie would stab them in the back. After a long time of acclimating to the Vandals, the expert pilot became their new permanent fixture. With no outward signs of doubt and alienation, everyone thought the foreign expert pilot from the Dark Plasma Star Sector had fully integrated into this latest chapter in his life.

While Talkative Jimmy and some of his acquaintances may have become aware of some of the dangers due to Ves, how could they know the depth of the problem?

The biggest reason why Ves couldn't tell Jimmy or Captain Byrd of the magnitude of the problem was because he broke a serious taboo. Any attempt at brainwashing an expert pilot received serious condemnation no matter how benign the reason may be!

With Major Verle stuck directing the fleet in orbit, Ves had no other confidants to confide in this matter.

Even if he wanted to do something, now might not be the time. This was because the Vesians that managed to reach the Aeon Corona System already showed off at least one expert pilot.

Many expert pilots didn't put much distinction between landbound and spaceborn combat so long as they possessed an expert mech tailored for each environment. The only reason why most regular mech pilots only specialized in one environment these days was because it took too much training to train them to be good in both.

It was a matter of specialization.

A decent mech pilot already took fifteen years to train. If they spent all fifteen years training to excel in landbound combat, such a mech pilot could easily be twice as skilled than a mech pilot that split his attention between landbound and spaceborn combat.

Expert pilots didn't suffer from the same constraints. Their overall skill level and learning ability surpassed the human norm. Even experts who previously dedicated in landbound, aerial or spaceborn combat for all their lives quickly became proficient in operating in other environments soon after they advanced to their current ranks.

When the Vesian fleet initially repelled the ambush from the worshippers of Haatumak, they showed off at least one expert pilot. Though the battle took

place in space, who knew if the Vesians deployed that same expert with their ground forces?

Furthermore, what if they brought more than one expert?

This was a very realistic possibility. Therefore, even if Ves wanted to go behind everyone's backs and do something to Venerable Xie, he could only hold in his impulses until they finally completed their confrontation with the Vesians.

Ves didn't believe the Vesians would be stumped by the breakdown effect. They would surely be able to make it to the Starlight Megalodon. There, the Vandals would finally be able to contribute to the war effort again by ruining the plans of their hated foes.

"The Vesians hate us so much that they won't even care about Venerable Xie's old allegiances. He's as much at risk of annihilation as the rest of us. He also needs to get a ride out of this star system."

While the possibility that Venerable Xie would band together with their enemies still existed, Ves didn't think such an outcome was in the cards. There was no point in grooming mech pilots into his loyalists if that was the case.

Still, the man might be doing that in order to fool people like Ves and Jimmy.

What was Venerable Xie's endgame?

"Whatever the case, I'm nowhere near a solution than before. Not without turning every Vandal in my enemy and stripping our ground forces of an indispensable champion."

Ves already developed some drastic plans, but he didn't think about enacting any of them before the Flagrant Swordmaidens encountered the Vesians.

For now, he returned to other matters. Now that a significant time went by since they gathered all of the experimental data, the beast rider project that Ves presided over finally came within reach of completing its goals.

After a day of collating data and incorporating the latest insights in his latest work, Ves borrowed a 3D printer and fabricated five different neural interfaces.

All of them shared the same starting point, but differed from each other in crucial areas. Ves wanted to fabricate even more variants, but figured that the risk of testing so many newly-developed neural interfaces posed too much of a risk.

Ves was not an expert in neural interfaces!

He reminded himself of this fact over and over again because the neural interfaces he designed might pose a significant threat to anyone who utilized them! Ves simply couldn't predict the danger because he lacked too much expertise in this difficult field!

Each neural interface consisted of a big metal box and a customized set of helmets. The beast rider only needed to wear the helmets, as this would be the medium that connected their minds to the hardware inside the box.

The box contained a lot of hardware that processed incoming and outgoing data from the mech pilot's helmet and the organic neural interface buried inside Qilanxo's skull. It also contained a lot of customized programming including the essential translation filter that Ves went through an enormous amount of effort to make.

Almost half of the data that Ves came in touch with contributed to the development of the translation filter.

Each neural interface variant also carried different versions of the translation filter.

When Ves placed the five sets of components on a long table, he admired the finished products for a bit. "These are the fruits of our labor. So much time has passed, and it is only through gathering an extensive amount of data from performing a battery of tests on some captive wild gods that we completed it at all."

All the other experts of the beast rider project gazed at the neural interfaces with mixed expressions. Each of them looked tired as they processed the data and completed their analyses at breakneck pace since the first tranches of data poured in. Some even felt they had become a part of history by contributing to the development of a device never seen before in the galaxy.

These were neural interfaces meant to be used by beast riders attempting to connect with the minds of one of the most powerful and unique lifeforms on Seven!

No one had ever heard of anything like the god species of Seven emerging elsewhere in the galaxy. Didn't that make them pioneers? Even if humanity already already mastered something similar elsewhere in the galaxy, they still felt proud at the thought of pushing the boundaries of existing knowledge and developing something entirely novel!

"It's not over yet." Ves cautioned the researchers who all looked forward to a few good nights of sleep. "None of these neural interfaces may work. Some may even be outright dangerous to our beast riders. We can only find out if they're any good if we perform some live testing."

This presented a lot of controversy. Considering the risks, how could they even know if the neural interface didn't endanger the lives of anyone who made use of them? They had no baseline to work with at all. Simulating the results didn't work because they couldn't model the man-beast connection.

This was the inherent challenge of developing something drastically new! They didn't know if they nailed the neural interfaces or accidentally developed a handful of new murder devices!

This problem haunted them since the start of the beast rider project. Fortunately, with that much time, Ves eventually came up with a somewhat viable solution.

"It's too irresponsible to subject our beast riders or any other mech pilot to test out these neural interfaces." He said. Then he grinned. "This is why our first tests will be performed with the help of our dwarf captives."

The wildlings differed enormously from baseline humans, but they still made for viable test subjects if Ves temporarily switched off the translation filters. After all, the thought patterns of the dwarves needed no translation. They already came in the correct format to interface correctly with the god species.

Two problems emerged if they wanted to perform these tests. First, they no longer had any living wild gods on hand. They could either go out and capture one, which was a bit of a hassle, or ask for Qilanxo to play along.

The second problem was that dwarves already possessed the same functionality as the beast rider neural interfaces. In order to avoid complications and invalid results, the exobiologists needed to operate inside their brains and disable their organic connectors.

As none of the exobiologists completely understood their brains, such an operation would be rife with errors and complications.

Nonetheless, they had no choice but to proceed.

Ves nodded to their resident exobiologist. "Prepare twenty dwarf captives for surgery. If any of them croak for any reason, then take out another one. Make sure to draw on the dwarf captives imprisoned in the Mind Blender first, as they have shown a proven capability to interface with mechs."

Once he issued some other orders to prepare for the testing, Ves personally sought out Qilanxo to ask for a favor.

"Please cooperate with tests." He pleaded to the sacred god. "Are you willing to allow our dwarf test subjects to interface with your mind through our newly-developed neural interfaces? It's for your own good! Once we succeed, we can finally enable Captain Orfan and Lieutenant Dise to connect directly with your mind!"

Qilanxo stared at Ves for one second with her huge eyes before releasing an angry roar. Ves almost bowled over from the strong and awful-smelling breath released by her indignant roar!

"Okay. Message received." Ves said before quickly withdrew.

The beast rider project still needed access to at least one exobeast to perform their tests. Though making use with a wild god added a couple of undesirable variables, Ves didn't think it would make too much of a difference and skew the results too badly.

The most important benefit to using a wildling captive and a wild god was that they didn't care for their welfare! Even if the dwarf captive fried his brains or if the wild god became insane, how did that affect the Flagrant Swordmaidens?

The beast rider project could simply order them to capture other test subjects. The planet was so huge and lush with life that they could easily bump into a wild god regardless where they traveled. The scout mechs ranging out of the current location of their camp already mapped the positions of at least eight nearby wild gods within several hundred kilometers!

The dwarfs were even more numerous, with small tribes popping all over the place wherever the huge animal herds grazed the fast-growing grasses and foliage.

In fact, as soon as Ves gave the order, the Vandals quickly sent out a double squad to subdue the nearest wild god within a day. Because the beast was too big and heavy to bring back to the camp, Ves and the other experts participating in the research project all boarded into a fast transport along with some essential equipment and made their way to the unlucky wild god.

"Alright, let's get things ready!"

Once there, they set up their equipment and inserted all kinds of sensors and monitors into the wild god. In particular, they placed most of their sensors near the head of the wild god to monitor its brain activity.

Once they made their preparations, they brought out a random dwarf captive and placed them into a specialized restraining chair installed on top of the back of the subdued wild god. A box rested behind the chair, while a researcher affixed the helmet component onto the dwarf's head.

"The dwarf looks kind of out of it." Ves remarked. "Are you sure you didn't botch his brain surgery somehow?"

An exobiologist besides him smiled. "That's only due to the sedatives we pumped inside his bloodstream. We've already injected a counteragent to flush the sedatives. The dwarf will certainly regain his wits in ten more minutes. By then, he'll be sober enough to participate in this experiment."

"Alright." Ves nodded, accepting the explanation. "Well, if anything goes wrong, it's a good thing we brought some spares. we still have nineteen more dwarf captives to go through."

Within fifteen minutes, everything was set in place. Once they performed their final checks, Ves issued the command that everyone had been waiting for.

"Commence the first test!"

## Chapter 840 Five Variants

During the first test, nothing happened. The first variant of the neural interface came online and connected with the lobotomized brains of the first test subject.

However, the neural interface somehow refused to establish a connection with the organic antenna grown inside the skull of the wild god.

Ves frowned. "What's wrong?"

"The neural interface isn't able to establish a connection with the wild god. It's as if it can't detect the wild god!"

The first test therefore ended in a dud.

When they placed the second dwarf test subject in the restraining chair, they performed the same test.

"It's the same result, Mr. Larkinson! The neural interface isn't making a connection with the wild god's mind!"

The third test with the third dwarf captive proceeded exactly the same, as did the fourth test.

"Okay. It seems the problem lies with the hardware of this variant." Ves sighed in disappointment. "The first variant is supposed to be the safest, but evidently it's too conservative to actually work."

The chances of the first variant being able to work at all had always been the smallest. Yet if Ves succeeded with it, the chances of dangerous complications would have surely been the smallest as well.

This illustrated that the safest option hadn't been drastic enough to achieve the radical outcome they desired.

They needed to push the envelope.

"Alright, switch out the first variant for the second variant." Ves commanded. "I refuse the second version won't work."

"What about the four dwarf captives?"

"Return them to their cells. If we need some spare bodies, we can always make use of them later."

The experiments proceeded apace. Once some technicians switched out the first variant with the second variant, they brought out the fifth dwarf captive.

If the first variant neural interface represented the safest option, then the second variant pursued the opposite.

Ves held himself back the least when he designed the second variant! It held the most potential of all the variants, and if successful facilitated the deepest and most immerse man-beast connection.

However, all of those possibilities came with some very serious costs. To be frank, Ves did not dare to hope for a success. He only developed this risky variant in the first place in order to verify some theories and gather more data.

In order to develop the best neural interface for best riders, Ves needed to see what could go wrong.

"Alright, let's conduct the fifth test!"

Nothing exciting happened in the first thirty seconds. The neural interface started to establish a connection with the mind of the fifth dwarf captive. Once a firm connection emerged, the variant started to reach out its wireless tentacles to the subdued wild god.

It took some time for this connection to engage. Unlike with the first variant, the second variant managed to detect the wild god's organic antenna and successfully began to interface with it. This was a good sign!

"The man-beast connection is beginning to emerge!"

"The life signs of the dwarf has remained stable, no, his heart beat is starting to race!"

Alarms rang out of the control panels of the researchers as several anomalous signs emerged. The fifth dwarf captive started to scream as his body became wracked with pain!

"The neural interface is overstimulating the nerves of our test subject!"

"The amount of data being sent through the neural interface is hitting through the safe upper limits! The test subject can't take this much data!"

"Mr. Larkinson, please increase the settings of the filters!"

"No." Ves shook his head. "Not for this test. I want to establish a baseline for the second variant. There is a chance the flow of data will subside."

In the end, the dwarf succumbed. His brains practically fried until he became braindead. There was no saving his mind after that. Some of the researchers looked disappointed, but not too surprised. Ves maintained his composure during the entire ordeal.

"Take out the trash and put the sixth dwarf captive in the restraints." He ordered. "Adjust the second variant's filters by twenty percent."

The sixth dwarf captive lasted three minutes longer under the torture. The wildling died in the exact same way as the previous dwarf. The second variant simply exchanged too much data, and much of it consisted of junk data as well.

For the seventh test, Ves increased the intensity of the filters by fifty percent.

The seventh dwarf captive lasted eleven minutes longer than the sixth, but died the same way!

The eighth dwarf captive lasted half an hour more, yet barely became functional enough after that!

Overall, the daring innovations that Ves incorporated into the second variant had all been duds! He went way too far with its design and overlooked some crucial interactions that turned out to have deadly results.

No matter. Ves smiled because he gathered a lot of pertinent data. With the help of the lessons learned from these lethal tests, he became much more confident in designing a safer neural interface.

"Alright, that's enough for the second variant. Let's proceed with the third variant."

The third variant attempted to do something new. The neural interface wasn't anything special, but Ves beefed up its programming and added various lines of code inspired by the code used in the Farund Affair.

Basically, the third variant attempted to brainwash the wearer of the helmet into becoming a better beast rider, among other hidden instructions.

Ves couldn't do much more because he could only adapt from a limited sample of code. He didn't possess the expertise to develop completely original programming for a neural interface.

Naturally, Ves didn't tell anyone in the beast rider project of his intentions. He simply presented the third variant as one of the more boring alternatives.

"Commence the ninth test."

The ninth test turned out to go wrong right away. Just after the neural interface established a connection with the dwarf captive, the little fellow screamed and bled through his nose.

The fellow didn't even manage to hold out for more than ten seconds!

Ves immediately adopted an ugly face. Something awfully serious went wrong. The programming somehow led to an immediate adverse reaction!

If that had been a mech pilot, then they would have died in the same way most likely!

"Clean up the mess, but don't bring out the tenth captive yet. I'll have to make some adjustments to the third variant."

Fortunately, while Ves didn't hope that something like this might happen, he nonetheless prepared for such an eventuality. He climbed up to the back of the wild god and approached the testing chair. He drew out the third variant neural interface and replaced its firmware with another, more conservative version.

Once he returned, he commanded the tests to resume.

The tenth dwarf captive didn't die at the start, fortunately.

Instead, two minutes in, his entire upper head exploded for some reason!

It took a lot of time for the technicians to clean up the awful mess and sterilize the neural helmet and testing chair.

Most of the researchers still looked spooked by what happened. They had never heard of a neural interface inducing someone's head to physically explode like that!

Ves laughed awkwardly as he climbed up to replace the firmware with yet another version. "I think this is a unique reaction due to the deviated physiology of the dwarfs."

The eleventh test proceeded soon after that. The eleventh dwarf captive didn't scream, bleed through their nose, or blow up their skulls for no reason.

Instead, he fell unconscious and died quietly seven minutes into the test. He didn't become braindead, but instead died for real as his heart gave up the ghost and stopped pumping out blood.

No one could explain why this happened. The more squeamish researchers started having second thoughts about this sequence of tests. Was it truly worth the risk to develop a beast rider neural interface?

What would happen if they switched from a dwarf to a human like Captain Orfan? It was impossible to achieve the exact same results because their genes, physiology and brain structure differed too much.

While neural interfaces ought to work on most variants of human, those subject to more extreme modifications often required their own versions of neural interfaces. This especially applied to mech pilots with a brain structure substantially different from the baseline human norm.

Nonetheless, short of volunteering their own mech pilots as guinea pigs, Ves had no choice but to resort to dwarves when performing his live tests. It was akin to using rats or dogs to test medical treatments meant for humans.

They continued on with the twelfth test along with a final firmware change. Ves held out the most hope for this version because he stripped nearly all of the extra code.

No dice. The twelfth dwarf captive died even faster than the eleventh! Just like the previous test subject, the twelfth dwarf suffered from the same cause of death!

This pretty much told Ves that his attempts at adding some 'creativity' to the programming of the neural interface turned out to be extremely dangerous!

No wonder the MTA heavily restricted the development of neural interfaces! It was far too easy to lead mech pilots to their deaths if a mech designer incautiously decided to flex their programming muscles!

"Alright, the third variant is a bust." Ves stated lightly. "Switch it out for the fourth variant and prepare the thirteenth dwarf captive."

The fourth variant incorporated some creative elements as well, but not in its programming thankfully. It was actually the deluxe version of a neural interface as Ves added certain hardware design elements that he'd seen in the neural interfaces of the Parallax Star and the Pale Dancer.

In theory, the additions should allow for a stronger and more stable connection. It held a lot of potential, but cost at least a hundred times more to fabricate due to large amount of trace exotics it drew upon!

As the thirteenth dwarf captive started to interface with the fourth variant, the outcome was anything but luxurious.

The dwarf immediately uttered a painful cry. Through three tortuous minutes, the dwarf managed to hold out until his brains eventually fried.

Ves sighed. "Well, it seems that money can't buy success in this case."

He didn't change anything about the fourth variant and simply let the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth test subjects undergo the exact same conditions.

He watched with interest as the dwarves each held on for different durations. The fourteenth dwarf died in just two minutes, while the fifteenth dwarf lasted thirty-seven minutes. As for the sixteenth test subject, for some miraculous reason he lasted two entire hours without suffering any adverse effects!

"Lucky sixteen! He's our first survivor!"

Only a couple of researchers agreed. A one-in-four success rate was an abysmal result for a neural interface. Even if the sixteenth dwarf captive happened to fall in some sort of sweet spot that strangely allowed him to suffer no adverse effects, it became clear that the fourth variant was far too picky to be adopted as their main focus.

Still, they gathered an enormous amount of data from their first successful attempt at interfacing the mind of a dwarf to the mind of a wild god. Through subsequent tests, they managed to confirm that the dwarf could convey his thoughts to the wild god and vica versa!

No matter if they retired the fourth variant, the successful interfacing attempt at least vindicated all of their hard work.

There was a light at the end of the tunnel!

"Alright, let's end the test for now." Ves commanded with a smile. "Pull the sixteenth dwarf captive back and perform a complete checkup of his body. I want to know everything that has changed since his last checkup. We might stumble upon some unexpected surprises."

Once they brought away Lucky Sixteen, a couple of technicians switched out the fourth variant with the fifth and final variant.

Anticipation grew in Ves as he watched the fifth variant neural interface being slotted in. Out of all the variants, he placed most of his hopes in the fifth variant!

That was because it was the orthodox neural interface!