

Mech 3221

Chapter 3221: Persham Chamber of Commerce

When the medium-sized trading vessel began to approach the massive expeditionary fleet, she slowed down as if she became intimidated by the thousands of combat-ready mechs hovering close.

A small escort dispatched by the Avatars of Myth eventually flew alongside the vessel called the Dented Coin and performed detailed scans with specialized equipment. When the Avatars verified that the civilian vessel contained no bombs, heavy weapons, viruses and other significant hazards, they cleared the ship but continued to escort her forward.

The scans not only searched for potential booby traps, but also provided the Larkinsons with a fairly detailed glimpse inside the Dented Coin.

Ves called up a projection that displayed the overall schematic and other properties of the medium-sized trading vessel.

"She's roughly thirty years old, which means she was built fairly early in the Vulcan Empire's history. Her design is already adapted to the needs of her dwarven crew. The gravitic projectors are extra strong in every compartment of the ship except the cargo bay. What's really annoying is that the height of most of her corridors and compartments is a lot shorter than normal!"

If someone like Ves stepped aboard the Dented Coin, then he had to keep his back hunched for him to even walk through the cramped passageways! If he wore something bigger like his Unending Regalia, then his helmet would probably smack against something each time he attempted to pass through a hatch.

Ves glanced at his most trusted honor guard. Someone as tall as Nita in her immensely bulky heavy combat armor might not even be able to squeeze through the narrowest corridors at all! It was as if the vessels were deliberately designed to frustrate normal human boarding parties!

Paying a visit to the Dented Coin was out of the question to the Larkinsons even before security considerations came into play.

In truth, Ves didn't even have to show up for this meeting. Shederin Purnesse already possessed sufficient rank and status to represent the Larkinson Clan to foreigners. He just wanted to show up because he was curious about how the dwarves were like and how much they differed from the ignorant mining slaves that used to work in the mines of Desala X.

They waited for a moderate period of time before a pair of Bright Warriors escorted a fat, stubby shuttle into the hangar bay.

Ves could tell a lot about people from the equipment they used. It was his favored way of judging others because most individuals never thought about hiding their true nature when they handled their own stuff.

In his eyes, the shuttle was over a decade old and had seen its fair share of landings and departures.

The underside of the broad shuttle was marked with plenty of stains, scratches and even marks left by firearms. It appeared that the Persham Chamber of Commerce wasn't exactly having the best of times.

Though the shuttle was in anything but a pristine state, Ves still saw signs that the Pershams did not neglect it completely. The propulsion system worked smoothly in a way that could only be accomplished through regular maintenance. According to the scans, every critical system was in sound condition and wouldn't break down anytime soon. The vehicle could easily last for two more decades before it required an extensive overhaul.

"I see." Ves quietly murmured.

Once the dwarven vessel touched down onto the deck, a hatch slowly slid open with a hiss. A metal stairway folded out from below. The rather low-tech nature of this solution caused Ves to feel nostalgic.

The Dented Coin, the shuttle and the dwarves he was about to meet were all of a low standard. Ves felt an inherent sense of superiority over the visitors even though he used to be a third-rater himself a couple of years ago. It was weird how quickly his mentality shifted.

Several short and stocky forms emerged out of the shuttle. Their boots loudly clanked against the steps of the metal stairway. Despite the shorter forms of the arriving dwarves, they were not lighter than ordinary humans.

In fact, they were heavier! Their genetic makeup caused them to grow much denser and stronger bodies. Their flesh, bones and other organs were all tough and durable in a way that baseline humans could never reach. Only extensive augmentation allowed other humans to reach or surpass the strength and durability of the dwarven subspecies.

Out of the handful of dwarves, most of them looked like guards or assistants. Only two notable figures were among the procession today. Both of them looked quite different from the rest.

The leader of the visiting group consisted of an older dwarven man with balding greying hair and a noticeably bushy grey beard.

In fact, the apparent leader's beard was so long that its tip reached all the way to the dwarf's thick ankles!

Though the Persham did not seem to spend much time grooming his beard, its rugged appearance conveyed a sense of rural toughness that probably allowed him to blend in with other rougher types.

The other dwarf was a younger but still mature-looking woman. Her long, curled hair was dyed in violet and she was nearly just as broad and substantial as her leader.

Both dwarves radiated a typical air of authority. Ves found it impressive that they managed to maintain their composure despite stepping aboard a ship of powerful foreigners.

The Vulcanites were a proud people and even their third-raters still held a bias against humans no matter the status of the latter.

Minister Shederin took a step forward and raised his arms in greeting.

"Welcome to the Larkinson Clan, my dwarven friends. I am Minister Shederin Purnesse. We have already spoken to each other over the comm."

The grey-bearded dwarf looked up at Shederin. "Aye, that is so. So you tall folk want to visit my home province, do you? Well, you're welcome to go as long as you are willing to put up the goods. Half now, half later. That's the agreement."

"Our cargo holds contain enough mining, agricultural and industrial equipment to start up a new city. These goods are yours as long as we are able to reach the Paramount Province."

The older dwarf looked pleased with the reassurance. He turned his steely gaze to Ves. "So you're the boss of this clan, right? You've got a lot of fancy stuff. This is the first time I've seen a ship this big with a prow shaped like a giant cat. Back home, you'd be beaten black and blue if you dared to waste so much money and resources on that kind of waste."

Well, third-rater or not, the Vulcanite did not treat his wealthier human client as royalty. Ves found it rather refreshing.

"And you are?" Ves raised his eyebrow.

"The name's Olivier Persham. I'm the director of the Persham Chamber of Commerce. That means I'm in charge. Don't you have a fancy implant or something that can tell you that?"

"I do, but I find it much more preferable for others to introduce themselves to me on their own accord. It's more personal that way."

"Huh. Well, you're not that bad for a tall folk." Olivier grumbled before gesturing his meaty hand at the woman standing next to him. "That's my daughter, by the way. Utha's currently in charge of procurement, but she'll be taking over from me when my beard grows long enough for me to trip myself."

Male dwarves were insanely touchy about their beards.

Unlike tall folk who didn't ascribe any symbolism to their own facial hair, the dwarves came up with lots of different meanings. There were so many nuances to dwarven beards that Ves would only put his foot in his mouth if he made a remark about this topic.

Utha Persham did not look particularly impressed at Ves and his bare chin. "I'm here to inspect the goods promised to us. I need to make sure the equipment you promised to us is usable by dwarves. I can't count the number of times you ignorant tall folk sent us machines where the controls are too high or the seats are too tall."

Shederin gestured to a nearby official from his Minister. "My assistant here shall bring you to the ships which hold the gear you are interested in. We have already made sure that the machines are fully compatible with dwarvenkind."

"I shall be the judge of that." The woman said. "Let's go. The sooner we can get this done, the sooner we can start moving."

While the Larkinsons guided Utha to another shuttle, Ves and Shederin led Olivier to a broad aircar which flew deeper into the Vivacious Wal.

The brief trip provided the dwarven director with an impressive view of what the Vivacious Wal had to offer. From the splendid corridors to the gleaming towers of Dawn City, the joyful side of the capital ship showcased the prosperity of the Larkinson Clan.

Only a wealthy organization was able to erect and maintain such a large and impressive living environment in space!

Though Minister Shederin and Director Olivier Persham only occasionally exchanged words, Ves was able to learn a lot about his dwarven guest.

The older fellow might look old, but his mentality was vigorous. Olivier possessed a lot of inner strength and had plenty of life left.

Once the aircar touched down on a special landing field in front of the Golden Palace, Olivier finally couldn't keep his thoughts straight. He looked at the impressive facade and gazed at the monumental bust of the Golden Cat.

That latter element was a recent addition to the Golden Palace. Ves had personally casted this ornament in order to turn it into another totem. Its presence gave the seat of the clan administration a strong sense of belonging towards the Larkinson Clan and its ancestral spirit.

Ves was curious to see how the director reacted to his first encounter with a glow. The Fermi Star Cluster was so far away from the LMC's activity zone that none of the locals should have experienced anything comparable.

"What is this...?" Olivier asked as he temporarily lost his tough persona. "Is this... a god?"

"The Golden Cat is our mascot. We see her as our patron and our source of unity." Shederin smoothly answered. "This piece is personally made by our patriarch. If you were a Larkinson, you would experience this glow in a much more intimate way."

"Excellent craftsmanship." The dwarven director genuinely praised the work. "Our dwarven artisans are good, but I haven't seen many pieces that can top the quality of this piece. If it wasn't made by a human, I would have made an offer for it. A work of art like this is worth a lot of hammers in the Uriburn Province."

The hammer was the local currency of the Vulcan Empire. It was a strange name but the dwarves didn't seem to have any problem with it. The dwarves had become good at distinguishing whether someone was referring to literal hammers or the currency that went by the same name.

Ves smiled. He instantly felt a little closer to the dwarf. "Thank you for the compliment. I have made an earnest effort to create this bust but it is far from my best work."

"So I've heard." Olivier said. "Do you know why I decided to accept this contract? It's because you and some of your pals are excellent craftsmen. Tall folk or not, the fact that you managed to make not one but several masterwork mechs means that you are blessed by Vulcan himself. You must be a good friend of dwarves like us since our god is vouching for you! Am I right?"

The mention of being 'blessing by Vulcan' almost caused Ves to stumble. His eyes turned weird as he tried to process Olivier's strange words.

"Uhhh... I guess you're right, hehe." Ves nervously laughed. "I love dwarves. I have great respect for the dwarven people. I hope we can be friends."

Olivier grinned back at Ves. "I like you a lot more already!"

Perhaps Ves did have a way with dwarves.

Chapter 3222: Children of Vulcan

They reached a large meeting hall that had been set up as both a conference room and a place to formally meet with foreign guests. The luxurious interior was highly modular and could transform into different arrangements depending on the needs of the hosts.

Given the typical character and interests of the Vulcanites, Minister Shederin had already preconfigured the meeting hall's interior design in a specific manner.

The luxury and open display of prosperity was amped up. The hall also contained a noticeably greater number of statues, mock-ups of Larkinson mechs and other artful displays.

Though Ves hadn't made any of these pieces, the Larkinson Clan had a lot more craftsmen than just himself and his fellow mech designers.

Since the clan was led by a mech designer, it developed an increased emphasis on anything related to production. Both mass production and artisanal production became prized in the Larkinson Clan as many clansmen aspired to become the next Ves even if they weren't necessarily aiming to become a mech designer.

The recent effort to expand the non-combat oriented aspects of the clan led to a substantial increase in the number of painters, sculptors and other creative artists in the ranks. The acquisition of the Vivacious Wal opened up a lot of room for professionals who weren't able to contribute to the immediate survival of the Larkinson Clan but nevertheless added a lot of value to its people over time.

If Ves had to mention one fault about the display, it was that the various art pieces were all made by different artists whose overall intentions didn't align with each other.

Every creator possessed a design philosophy. Even if it wasn't as remarkable as that of a mech designer, anyone who engaged in a creative pursuit developed a style and set of principles that characterized their work.

From all of the various pieces in the hall, Ves was able to detect a myriad of different philosophies.

For example, one artist felt that art must always put people to thought. He or she therefore sculpted a statue that depicted a cat in a vaguer and less substantial manner. The viewer had to employ a serious amount of thought in order to derive any meaning from the partially-abstract work.

Another artist focused on pomp instead of depth. This person believed that a good work was supposed to be a visually-impressive spectacle that immediately evoked a reaction.

The cat made by this person looked larger than life and was replete with hyperrealistic details.

Although these statues and more were not designed with the same theme in mind, they showcased the diversity of creativity in the Larkinson Clan, which was also impressive in a way. None of the pieces were bad, though that depended a lot on taste.

Fortunately, the dwarf wasn't picky in that regard. His eyes darted from one direction to another with great interest.

"I've seen better, but this is a decent display." Olivier Persham gruffly said.

Shederin smiled. "Our clan specializes in designing and producing mechs. We would love to show our best war machines to you, but many of them are strategically sensitive."

"I get it. You can keep your toys to yourselves. When I took over our chamber of commerce, I learned early on that it's best to keep my curiosity in check if I want to stay in business."

Yet the Persham Chamber of Commerce took a substantial risk by conducting business with tall folk. Sure, the Larkinson Clan may have received a pass from the MTA, but Ves imagined that it did not endear the Pershams to their fellow Vulcanites.

This wasn't his problem, though. It was up to the Pershams to manage their own reputation. He was here to obtain a ride to the Paramount Province and out, nothing more.

Once the three settled down on a couple of comfortable seats, the minister started to discuss ordinary business matters with the dwarf. Director Olivier Persham was a businessman by nature so it made sense to start this conversation in familiar territory.

The two mostly reiterated the terms that they had already agreed beforehand. They only proposed minor changes based on what they managed to observe from each other.

For example, Director Olivier became so impressed by the craftsmanship displayed by specific people such as Ves that he even asked for pieces of the patriarch's work.

Ves awkwardly smiled. "I am afraid I cannot oblige you, director. I am a mech designer. I am only qualified to sell my mechs. However, we don't have any dwarven mech models in our catalogue and we do not have any plans to expand our business activities to the Fermi Star Cluster."

"I'm not asking for your mechs, Patriarch Larkinson." The dwarf said with a touch more respect in his tone. "I am interested in purchasing one or more pieces like that giant cat bust that you have placed in front of your palace. These glows of yours are fascinating

and your craftsmanship is impeccable. Even if they are not masterworks, the fact that they are made by a masterwork craftsman already increases their value and significance to our people. A select clientele in our empire would be greatly interested in buying your handmade works."

Though Ves felt flattered by the praise, he wasn't sure whether it was desirable for his work to end up in the hands of dwarves.

"I'm sorry, Director Olivier, but I have my principles. Please respect my artistic vision." He said.

Though the old dwarf looked disappointed, he was professional enough to keep it at that. A businessman faced countless rejections throughout his career.

"That is a pity, patriarch. I have become even more convinced that you are blessed by Vulcan. You were born the wrong way in my opinion. You should have been a dwarf! If you were born among our people, you would have been celebrated as one of our rising stars! If you are ever interested in letting your great work be appreciated by those who value true craftsmanship, then I can refer you to a renowned clinic that is excellent at converting tall folk like you into dwarves. I can offer you a voucher that will give you a 7 percent discount on the top-of-the-line operation."

Ves immediately raised his palm. "Thank you for the helpful offer, but I am already content with leading and supporting my own clan. It would be irresponsible for me to drop out and become a member of your esteemed empire. I am truly grateful that you see me as a potential dwarf. In another life, I could have indeed become one of your greatest people, but alas that time has passed."

Minister Shederin quickly interjected before the dwarf could bring up any further nonsense.

"Director Olivier, let us discuss our planned route to the Paramount Province and back. I understand that we require approval from multiple provincial authorities in order to pass through their territories..."

As the two began to talk about relevant matters again, Ves reflected on the earlier conversation.

In some strange way, he felt as if he was responsible for making the Vulcanites develop an interest in craftsmanship. It was rather strange to see how his influence from decades ago produced huge ripples that changed an entire star sector and affected the culture of an entire population.

From a twisted perspective, the Vulcan Empire was much like the Larkinson Clan. They were both his. Without him, they wouldn't have existed. This realization caused Ves to feel oddly responsible for the Vulcanites.

They were like delinquent children in a sense. They may have walked a crooked path and developed in ways that disgusted Ves, but they were still 'his people', though no one except himself was willing to acknowledge this truth.

It was funny to think like this but Ves truly began to see the children as Vulcan as his own children. His absence during their critical growth period had led them astray, resulting in a hateful people occupying a hateful state.

He quietly sighed. It was too late for the father to return home when the children had already grown up into adults. He lost the right to raise the Vulcanites a long time ago when his Mastery experience came to an end.

Besides, he seriously doubted whether he could walk up to any group of dwarves and convince them that he was their actual god. He would probably get beaten to death before he said another sentence!

"It's agreed, then." Shederin stood up and held out his hand. "You arrange all matters concerning our passage and we hand over the funds and goods."

"Aye. That sounds right by me. It's a shame you won't sell your patriarch's artwork. They're really fine, I tell you." Director Olivier Persham said as he slid down his seat and reached his hand up to shake the minister's hand. "I'll bring you right to my stomping grounds, have no doubt about that."

The two proceeded to sign a contract after they finalized all of the details. Once this business was done with, both Shederin and Olivier relaxed a bit. The negotiations had concluded.

Though the dwarf didn't have any business left aboard the Vivacious Wal, Ves decided to show him around the ship some more. The Vulcanite was friendly enough and didn't possess any blinding hate against the so-called tall folk. Shederin did well in selecting a rather tolerant dwarf to be their guide.

"You've only flown above the streets of Dawn City on our way in, but that is no way to see what our clan is actually like. Would you like to tour it on foot?" Ves offered.

"Why sure! It's not every day that I get to explore a fancy ship city. This is the first time I've worked with a client that even has one. I mostly get to step aboard boring cargo haulers."

They proceeded to venture out of the Golden Palace and into the downtown area of Dawn City under considerable escort. Though the presence of all of the guards caused the Larkinsons who frequented the streets to quiet down or make way, they were not overly concerned with the changes.

Due to the heightened alert activity, the streets were a bit more barren than Ves liked, but the city still held plenty of interest even if it gave an empty impression.

The architecture, the monuments erected to honor various clansmen and mech legions, the roaming pets and more all gave Director Olivier a taste of what it was like to live among the Larkinsons.

"Your clan is truly loaded." He uttered as he looked up at a tall and elaborate fountain. "If your people have enough money to squander on stuff like this, then I don't even want to know how much you spent on your combat assets."

"It's not modest, that's for certain." Ves grinned. "What is your own home like, director?"

"Paramount is... a lot more basic than you can think. It's the birthplace of the revolution, but it's also the first place that is abandoned by it." Olivier said frankly, not caring whether he said anything bad about his government. "The richest and fattest dwarves all reside in the Uriburn Province and other second-class areas. Folk like us from third-class provinces don't get any of the fancy investments and development projects. We are constantly being told we have to pay for our own development, so that is exactly what we've been doing."

"I see." Ves said. "I can imagine that this is an immense project. I used to be a third-rater myself, so I know full well how much of a gap there is between a third-rate state and a second-rate state."

Olivier responded with a sad smile. "I'm not even thinking about bringing all of my folks back home to second-class standards. I'm already happy if I can make their lives just a little bit easier. More schooling, better hospitals and greater infrastructure can go a long way in turning the Paramount Province into a more pleasant place."

"That's a noble aspiration. I hope our contribution can help with bringing you closer to your goal."

"Oh, it will definitely help, patriarch. I wouldn't be so friendly to you if you didn't promise so much compensation!"

Chapter 3223: Traditional Recipe

After forming an agreement with the Persham Chamber of Commerce, the expeditionary fleet finally set course to the interior of the Vulcan Empire.

As a third-class vessel, the Dented Coin was a little slower than the ships of the Golden Skull Alliance. Her singular FTL drive was as old as the trading ship and was optimized for efficiency and longevity rather than speed.

Nonetheless, third-class FTL drives did not differ too much in speed. They mostly cheated out in other areas such as stability and tolerance against higher levels of gravitic activity.

During their travels, the Larkinsons began to hold more exchanges with the Pershams. They either talked over the galactic net or invited them over.

It wasn't just about friendship. What Minister Shederin and the clan were actually aiming for was to gather insider knowledge about the state of Vulcan Empire. As a trading company, the Persham Chamber of Commerce possessed a wealth of information that wasn't easily accessible in the public. Director Olivier Persham maintained active trading contacts in many provinces and visited all of them at one point or another in his life.

He had grown up seeing the dwarves go from being the underdogs to becoming the absolute authority in the Smiling Samuel Star Sector. The passage of time may have faded his memories a bit, but he still had plenty of interesting stories to tell. The only challenge was to pry them from his mouth.

"Haha, here's a gift for you, lad!" Director Olivier grinned as his thick feet lumbered over to Ves and Minister Shederin in one of the guest lounges aboard the Vivacious Wal.

An honor guard stepped forward and accepted the gift-wrapped box on the clan patriarch's behalf. The impassive guard performed a close-ranged scan and found nothing wrong.

"Clear."

In truth, the gift and everything on the shuttle that brought Olivier over had already been scanned multiple times by different devices. This final check was mostly meant to convey a point.

Once Ves accepted the rectangular box and lifted it up and down in order to feel its heft.

According to Minister Shederin, the exchange of gifts was a time-honored diplomatic tradition. Everyone liked to receive nice things, and giving gifts was a way for people to show they were considerate towards the recipient.

Gifts could either be symbolic or possess a substantial amount of value. If the presents leaned towards the latter, then the relationship was usually more transactional in nature.

In other words, they were bribes.

In reality, the line between symbolic gifts and outright bribes wasn't so obvious. More valuable gifts might be considered bribes in one jurisdiction and mere trinkets in another jurisdiction.

Neither the Pershams nor the Larkinsons needed to resort to anything dubious. Their existing contract already satisfied their respective demands, so there was little reason to pursue more. This instance was merely about deepening their friendship.

Just as the Pershams prepared a gift, so did the Larkinsons.

"Ah, I have a gift for you as well, director. Here you go." He said and waved his hand.

A smaller gift-wrapped box appeared from behind and floated over to the dwarf. Director Olivier grabbed hold of it without any sense of guardedness. As soon as it fell into his hand, the gravitic hold over the box vanished.

Both of them proceeded to remove the decorative packaging and opened their respective boxes.

The dwarf lifted his thick eyebrow as he held a small mech figurine. It was a highly simplified but still exquisitely crafted representation of the Desolate Soldier. As a product that was handmade by Ves, it possessed a glow, however weak.

"This gift..."

"Since you have expressed so much interest in my mechs, craftsmanship and glows, I thought you would appreciate this little toy. What you are experiencing right now is just a fraction that the mech pilots of my actual mechs take comfort in. The only thing to take into account is that I'm not sure how long its glow will last."

Once Ves and his expeditionary fleet entered the Red Ocean, he wasn't sure whether the glow of this totem would still remain active. The complication was that its source was the Solemn Guardian.

He always wondered how far his design spirits were able to stretch their influence. He had a feeling that their range was substantially bigger than his own, but he did not dare to assume that it stretched across the entire Milky Way or beyond. Perhaps his stronger design spirits came closer but it was still a stretch to think that their influence was able to stretch across hundreds of thousands of light-years.

Leaving behind a totem here or there would help him determine the range of the various influences that empowered his products.

"This figurine is based on your most-sold mech model, right?" Director Olivier asked as he gazed at his gift in wonder. "I can feel why so many people like it, especially if it comes with an affordable tag."

Ves smiled. "The Desolate Soldier is one of my older and earlier mech models. I plan to come up with a revision of the original design eventually. I'm just waiting until I gain a bit

more skill and newer technologies become available. Right now, the original version is still able to keep up with more modern mechs despite being a lastgen design."

The dwarf looked wistful at the figurine. "With mechs like these, our empire would have become a lot more stable. Back in the old days, every citizen of the Vulcan Empire worked towards the same goals. We all wanted to make our people strong. These days, I miss our common purpose. Everyone is developing different ideas. Some dwarves want to stay put while others want to expand into other star sectors. Some of my people still insist that Vulcan is a human god while others have become convinced he is a dwarven god."

"What's your take on your patron god, director?" Ves curiously asked.

"He's a human god, of course!" Olivier replied without any hesitation. "Every dwarf from the Paramount Province knows the truth. Our faith in Vulcan was born there and we have always remained aware of who he truly is. Those liars and cheats who claim that Vulcan is a dwarf are delusional. As much as I like the idea of it, my faith still remains true."

"That... is an admirable sentiment."

Olivier's mood dropped. "It's a pity that all of the younger dwarves no longer assume what their parents say are true. They're getting more and more precocious. Hah! They know nothing! These arrogant kids all grew up when the Vulcan Empire just entered its golden period. They know little of the hardships involved with convincing foreign dwarves to support our case, fighting desperate battles against our former oppressors and making sure not to alarm the strongest human forces too soon. No, they just assume that dwarves like us were always invincible and that Vulcan must also be one of us for that reason."

The old dwarf began to ramble again, not caring too much that he was in the company of other humans. Ves and Shederin liked Olivier for that reason.

While that took place, Ves looked down on his own gift. A fat wine bottle rested in the box that he received. He held it by the neck and slowly lifted it up in order to study its label closer.

[ORIGINAL DESALA X AMBROSIA - TRADITIONAL RECIPE OF BLESSED VULCAN - XANTUR IRON BARREL AGED - 405 AOM]

"What the...?"

Ves felt very weird all of a sudden. He briefly recalled his attempt to raise the morale of the dwarven rebels during his last Mastery experience.

Back then, he was less than impressed by the ignorant and incompetent members of the Desala Resistance Movement. Though they were inventive enough to set up a hidden base right beneath their oppressors, they were woefully under equipped and underprepared to fight against the guard force of House Kantis.

As a student of General Verle, Ves knew that one of the deciding factors that could determine the outcome of a battle was morale. If the dwarves launched their escape attempt against the humans like normal, then they would have definitely lost heart once they understood how much they were outgunned!

This was why Ves employed a variety of tricks that were known to work.

Pretending to be Vulcan aroused their religious fervor and limited their rational thinking. The less logic they employed, the less they questioned the purpose of their actions.

Stuffing their bodies with alcohol was also a guaranteed way to relax and distract soldiers before they were sent into the meat grinder. Though the dwarves weren't able to get their hands on human-produced drinks, that didn't stop Ves.

Though he was a mech designer by profession, he learned enough science at school to know the basics on how alcohol was brewed.

The oldest and least sophisticated way to produce alcoholic drinks was to stuff a lot of food in a vat and let it ferment for a time. This sounded just like letting food rot, but the difference was that the chemical reactions were more controlled as the germs ate various sugars and produced ethanol along with other byproducts.

Ves employed this exact method without much care for sanitation and formulas. Ethanol was naturally deadly against bacteria and fungi after all. If this crude process worked for ancient humans who had yet to recognize blue as a distinct color, then it would work for him as well!

Of course, instead of using grapes and hops, Ves used the only food available to the dwarves at the time. The contents of nutrient packs contained sugar compounds as well so there was no reason why it shouldn't ferment. It was actually a favorite if extremely dangerous pastime of bored spacers who were stuck on the same berth for years at a time.

The only real challenge he faced was that the fermentation process took time. Ves increased the temperature but the lack of time resulted in a rather weak brew by modern human standards.

The resulting drink he casually called ambrosio still succeeded in intoxicating the dwarven miners! Despite their strong and robust bodies, they never enjoyed any drinks in their entire lives, so none of them built up any tolerance for alcohol!

When Ves checked the alcohol content of the bottle he received, he noticed that this 'original ambrosia' was indeed on the weaker side.

"Is this truly an authentic recipe?" Ves skeptically asked.

"Of course! We dwarves take our ambrosia seriously!" Olivier shouted. "The original recipe isn't too popular these days as there are better tasting ambrosias on the market, but the original recipe brewed from Desala X is still precious to us! Vulcan himself has introduced our kind to the pleasures of alcohol with this blessed recipe. The best scientists and brewmasters from our empire studied and reconstructed our god's original brewing process, allowing us to produce the nectar that has divinely inspired the original rebels once again. Traditional ambrosia is still used in important ceremonies and religious occasions. What you're holding is a blessed piece of history."

Ves didn't feel any blessings or anything special from the bottle. It was just a mass-produced version of the swill that he had originally produced.

Still, he appreciated the intent of this gift even though he thought it was probably trash. "Thank you for this gift, Olivier. I love exploring new cultures, and this ambrosia of yours is certainly an important part of your people."

"Well?"

"Well what?"

"What are you waiting for? Crack it open and try it out! This bottle is from my personal collection. I wanted to age it more but considering our friendship I thought it would be great to share this drink with you today. You won't regret it, patriarch!"

They did what the dwarf suggested. When Ves lifted his wine glass to his lips and smelled the ambrosia, he almost went back in time.

This was indeed close to his original brew!

It was too bad that the taste left a lot to be desired... Not all traditions were necessarily great.

Chapter 3224: Ferril Province

As Ves reluctantly drank his glass of Ambrosia, Olivier began to regale his audience with how the ambrosia industry began to bloom in the Vulcan Empire.

"Every dwarf loved ambrosia at first." He said. "The earliest rebels all swear by it and many of the dwarves they freed from other slave planets also became devotees to the one true recipe. There is just something about the specific ingredient composition of nutrient packs and the effect that Xantur iron has on the aging process that produces a

unique tasting drink in a quick amount of time. The original ambrosia was an exact fit for the dwarves back then. It was cheap, easy to produce and made us feel fearless before battle."

"So what changed?" Ves asked as he finished his glass of ambrosia.

He pointedly did not refill his glass.

"The outsider dwarves came in. These brothers of ours were different from people like me who were born in these star sectors. The reinforcements were all made up of wealthier and more successful dwarves who never knew what it was like to be a slave. If these pompous outsiders didn't come with crucial resources such as money, manpower, resources, mechs and other stuff, then we would have kicked them out long ago!"

The foreign dwarves who answered the rallying call of the original dwarven rebels were crucial in making the rebellion succeed. The former was a lot more capable and prepared to launch an actual takeover attempt. They just lacked a strong unifying purpose that could bring the scattered dwarves together in a single region until the initial Vulcanites entered the scene.

"I guess the outsider dwarves were used to drinking finer liquor, then." Ves guessed.

"Aye, that they do. Back then, they were slow to recognize Vulcan as their god, and didn't think much of his recipe. Still, even the outsiders realized that they couldn't keep drinking their human-produced swill."

Ves smirked. "So the outsider dwarves began to brew their own versions of ambrosias, is that right?"

"Yeah, and it all went downhill from there. I don't mind variation of our original Vulcan-blessed recipe, but the snobby outsider dwarves weren't happy with that. They began to use organic fruits and employ more elaborate methods based on human tradition. These days, the most popular ambrosias on the market are little different from traditional human beers, wines and other spirits. There is absolutely nothing left that has anything to do with Vulcan's gift to us. race. The only reason they are still allowed to be called ambrosia is because they were brewed by dwarves. As far as I'm concerned, they're only ambrosia in name."

Director Olivier held quite a lot of resentment over this issue. After several days of talking, Ves learned that he was a traditionalist at heart. He held true to the original values of the early Vulcanites and despised the way that other dwarves sought to diminish the dwarven society envisioned by the original band of rebels.

This contradiction ironically caused Olivier to become more friendly towards foreign human traders. Unlike his fellow dwarves who often looked down on his 'outdated' views

and lower class, human businessmen who were willing to trade with the Vulcanites only cared about business matters.

Overtime and over repeated transactions, the Pershams began to grow more comfortable with human traders than many of their fellow Vulcanites. In Olivier's opinion, too many dwarves who lived outside the Paramount Province were letting go of their traditions. The rising popularity of the Dwarven God Cult was the clearest indication that the Vulcan Empire of tomorrow was becoming even further removed from what Vulcan and the earliest rebels envisioned.

The Larkinsons were able to witness the contradiction between the Pershams and other dwarven factions when their fleet had just entered the Ferril Province.

A patrol ship dispatched by the provincial authorities was already waiting in the star system. The captain of the vessel immediately hailed the Larkinson Clan and issued a rude demand.

"Human oppressors!" A tanned dwarf with a messy red beard and a high-peaked hat roared from his captain's chair. "Do not go further! According to the new anti-crown terrorist legislation enacted by our province, you are ordered to shut down your engines and stay put while we personally inspect each and every one of your ships. Please be warned that we do not give you permission to travel anywhere deeper unless we have completed our inspection."

Ves frowned at this rude-sounding request. He turned to the projection of Minister Shederin. "Isn't our MTA pass supposed to give us immunity from the Vulcan Empire's crappy laws?"

"They are." The projection replied. "I am in the process of reminding the good patrol captain of this fact, but our message doesn't appear to be coming across."

Several minutes passed by as Shederin personally tried to reason with the bossy dwarf captain. Even though the vessel he commanded was nothing more than an ordinary second-class frigate, no one dared to despise her. The ship and her crew represented the Ferril Province which was equivalent to a second-rate state in the Vulcan Empire.

Ves tapped his fingers against his armrest while Lucky rested on his shoulder. The cat lazily yawned as if this little incident was nothing special.

"Meow."

"Hey, I doubt that bribing will work. This is a real Vulcanite."

Though Ves developed a closer friendship with the Pershams due to their frequent exchanges, he never forgot about what he learned about the Vulcanites. The vast majority of them hated the tall folk and blamed them for all of their troubles.

Now that the Larkinsons finally encountered locals who were different from the Pershams, it was already guaranteed that they would come face-to-face with one of the uglier aspects of the Vulcan Empire.

"...I don't care about this stinking pass!" The angry dwarven captain roared so loud that crumbs shook out of his beard. "Ever since you humans began to terrorize the galaxy, we suffered several terrorist attacks from you deceitful tall folk. Well, we won't put up with your false promises and useless assurances any longer. An MTA pass doesn't say whether there are any crown terrorists hiding among you, so we have to search for them ourselves!"

Ves wondered how the dwarves were supposed to detect the crown terrorists. As far as he was aware, no one except himself managed to find a working method to detect the hidden threats!

"Our detection methods are proprietary and developed at great cost by our great empire. We won't let you steal our secrets, so stop asking! Now, shut down your engines and don't think about jumping away from this star system. The rest of our inspection fleet is already on its way. Failure to comply will lead us to conclude that you are all crown terrorists bent on harming our great dwarven state. Do not run!"

The subsequent talks with the dwarven captain did not go well. No matter how much Shederin tried to convince the stubborn dwarf that the Larkinsons did not have to subject themselves to any inspections, the patrol leader simply did not acknowledge this truth.

When the Larkinsons leaned on the Pershams to help them out of this unexpected situation, Director Olivier failed to change the situation.

"The Ferils have always been difficult." His projection stated. "Ferril a middling province compared to the bigger ones such as Uriburn. That has always made them touchy. They bark a lot in order to make themselves feel more powerful than they actually are and their patrol officers are some of the worst in this regard."

"How do you usually handle these difficult officers?" Shederin asked.

"Ah, our chamber of commerce is too small to resist, so we just let their inspectors rummage through our trade vessels." Olivier helplessly replied. "They're not gentle about it and sometimes 'confiscate' a portion of our high-value goods claiming that they need to be sent back to headquarters for detailed inspections. We never hear anything about it again. Over time, we just stopped shipping any portable goods like traditional ambrosia or jewelry when passing through the Ferril Province."

"I see. So we're dealing with 'those' kinds of inspectors." Ves flatly said.

Shederin asked the most crucial question. "How will they treat human traders, director?"

"I'm not sure, to be honest. In the past, the Ferrils took MTA passes more seriously. They know that anyone who is influential enough to obtain a rare pass is not someone who is easy to deal with. The human traders usually managed to get through these hurdles by surrendering valuable 'contraband' to the inspection officers."

"I see. If it were that easy this time."

Ves could already guess that the dwarven inspectors weren't trying to fish for a greater bribe. From what the dwarf was saying about the Crown Uprising, the dwarves had become even more spooked towards the tall folk. They no longer regarded the occasional human trading fleets as safe and harmless anymore. Any vessel who came from outside the Smiling Samuel was a potential terrorist delivery vehicle in the eyes of the dwarves!

The Larkinsons and Pershams continued to negotiate with the captain of the patrol vessel. An hour went by without much result. Shederin and Olivier tried everything from offering enticing bribes to emphasizing that they were messing with tier 10 galactic citizens. They even threatened to report this incident to the MTA!

Unfortunately, none of these arguments worked!

"The incompetent MTA has failed to defend dwarvenkind against the menace of the crown terrorists before. A fleet of your size is bound to hide hundreds if not thousands of terrorists. We shall not allow humans like you to kill anymore dwarves. One more dwarven casualty is too much! As for this galactic citizen nonsense, this is a tall folk construct. What does it have to do with us dwarves?"

This degree of obstinacy was getting more and more exaggerated. Though the angry dwarf may be justified in considering visiting human fleets as potential threats, going as far as ignoring the MTA's authority went too far!

Ves felt more and more uneasy at this sudden obstacle. He began to suspect that this holdup was not as simple as it sounded.

One thing was for sure. He was never going to allow these Ferril dwarves to rummage through all of his ships and take whatever caught their fancy!

Two hours after the patrol captain initially issued his demand, Ves suddenly received an emergency hail from Calabast.

When Ves accepted the call, the spymaster looked incredibly serious and on guard.

"Ves! The Ferril patrol captain isn't being honest!"

"What's going on, Calabast?"

"It's an ambush!"

"What?!"

Ves instantly straightened his back, causing Lucky to yowl as the motion shook him out of his nap.

"Meow!"

"Tell me what this is all about!"

Calabast waved her hand, activating a projection that displayed a detailed schematic of the dwarven frigate.

"While our clan and the Persham Chamber of Commerce kept talking with the 'friendly' captain, my Black Cats and I secretly hacked into the systems of his ship. The security suite is good enough that we had to take it slow in order to minimize our chances of exposure. Once we managed to gain entry to their military communication systems, we found out the truth. The dwarven captain told us the truth that he is waiting for reinforcement. What he lied about was that the incoming fleet dispatched by the Ferril Province isn't just an inspection fleet. It's a full-blown war fleet consisting of three fully-strength mech divisions."

"WHAT?! THREE MECH DIVISIONS!?"

This time, Ves could no longer maintain his composure. He immediately shifted to crisis mode as he tried to estimate the expeditionary fleet's chances against this powerful dwarven fleet.

"Are they coming to inspect us or destroy us, Calabast?!"

"The latter." The spymaster grimly answered. "Their internal communications make it abundantly clear that they never intended to let us go. According to them, this is a punitive action. The tall folk hurt their citizens, so the Ferrils think it is justified to hit us back. They're coming for blood."

The incoming dwarven forces outnumbered the Golden Skull Alliance's forces by roughly three-to-two... These were highly unfavorable odds. The dwarves were not intent to fight an even battle!

Chapter 3225: Overreaction

The value of good intelligence capabilities became highly evident today as Calabast managed to discover an ambush in the making.

As soon as Ves discretely passed on the news to a small group of important Larkinsons and allies, the leaders of the Golden Skull Alliance became incredibly alarmed.

Although many people in the expeditionary fleet anticipated that the Vulcanites wouldn't be easy to deal with, few of them actually thought that the situation could deteriorate to this degree.

The Larkinsons, Glory Seekers and Crossers didn't even do anything! They had barely begun to travel towards the interior of the Vulcan Empire. They never stopped by any of the dwarven-occupied star systems during their guided journey and never communicated or did anything with any dwarven ships they met on their way.

The only dwarves the Larkinsons engaged with were the Pershams. Now that it was clear that the Ferrils intended to attack the expeditionary fleet, Ves couldn't help but direct his suspicions towards his apparent guides.

Had the Pershams led them into this ambush?

He did not develop this suspicion out of the blue. Assuming that Calabast's intelligence was accurate, then the Ferril Provincial Army already dispatched a combined force consisting of three complete mech divisions straight to Fordilla Zentra, the star system that the expeditionary fleet had just arrived in a couple hours ago.

How did the Ferrils know about the location of the expeditionary fleet? How were hostile Vulcanites able to anticipate the route to such a degree that they were able to send a combat fleet to an empty and unimportant star system at roughly the right time?

According to the estimates provided by Calabast, the incoming punitive fleet would arrive in Fordilla Zentra well before most ships of the Golden Skull Alliance finished cycling their FTL drives!

Depending on how much distance the incoming dwarven fleet needed to traverse in order to close in on the expeditionary fleet, the entire expeditionary fleet might or might not be able to escape from this star system in time.

While vessels with faster-cycling FTL drives and multiple drives might be able to get out right away, they would still have to leave a lot behind!

If it came down to it, Ves didn't mind abandoning his less valuable and increasingly more irrelevant support ships. They were already close enough to the beyonder gate that his combat ships could easily support a battle or two without requiring extensive replenishment.

"We'll be abandoning all of our sub-capital ships anyway once we're ready to pass through the first beyonder gate."

That didn't mean it was a good idea to evacuate and scuttle all of the combat and non-combat vessels that weren't able to cycle their FTL drives in time.

"We're too deep in dwarf country." Ves murmured.

It would take too long to reach the border of Smiling Samuel and reenter the Empire of the Lost.

With the dwarven fleet so close in pursuit, it was highly likely that their dedicated combat vessels were able to catch up to the expeditionary fleet.

The punitive fleet dispatched by the Ferril Provincial Army operated in friendly territory and did not need to drag along any slow and lumbering logistical or civilian vessels. This gave them a crucial advantage in FTL cycling time that would allow them to jump sooner than the entire expeditionary fleet!

Though Ves was not completely certain whether interception was possible, he had to take the worst-case scenario into account.

"No wait. It can get even worse." He frowned.

The fact that they were already in the Vulcan Empire meant that other Vulcanite forces might be on their way to surround and block the escape of the expeditionary fleet.

This didn't sound too likely right now as the Ferrills decided to attack the human visitors on their own, but the situation could easily change if battle commenced between the two forces!

Whether the Larkinsons won or lost this battle, the other dwarves in the Vulcan Empire would never allow any humans who attacked their own kind to get away!

Faced with all of these looming threats, Ves and the others had no choice but to quietly prepare for battle.

News soon spread throughout the ships that the dwarves intended to attack them all. Fortunately, panic hadn't erupted and no one had made any moves that revealed their awareness of an impending attack in front of the dwarven patrol ship.

It was crucial for the Golden Skull Alliance to maintain an information advantage during this crisis. The less the dwarves knew about their targets, the better!

Twenty minus passed since Ves quietly spread the word. The drums of war rumbled throughout the entire fleet.

All of the mech legions and other combat forces were quietly readying for battle without being too obvious about it. Most of the movements took place inside ships. From space,

the same mechs continued on with their lazy patrols with no sign that their mech pilots had become a lot jumpier.

Mechs were being prepared for battle. Mech pilots received preliminary briefings. The medical doctors were preparing for a flood of wounded soldiers while the ship crews were buttoning down as much equipment as possible in anticipation for hull breaches and other emergencies.

All of the civilians and non-combat personnel received instructions to hole themselves up in protected compartments with easy access to escape pods.

Meanwhile, Ves and several other important leaders held an emergency meeting.

In order to save time and minimize any useless discussions, only a small number of people came together this time.

From the Larkinson Clan, Ves, General Verle and Calabast appeared in the conference room. The latter were stationed aboard the Graveyard and the Blinding Banshee respectively, so they showed up by projection.

The projections of two Glory Seekers appeared a moment later. Marshal Ariadne Wodin and Venerable Brutus Wodin both looked grave. They had no doubts about the warning issued by the Larkinsons.

The projection of the Crossers appeared last. Patriarch Reginald Cross and Professor Benedict Cortez looked dourer than the rest. They were the least amused about the prospect of an impending battle.

"I told you it was a bad idea to enter the Vulcan Empire." Patriarch Reginald immediately accused. "I don't know why we believed in you and agreed to follow you into this dangerous state. The dwarves were always a threat!"

The Cross Patriarch's memory appeared to be faulty. Ves wasn't in a hurry to remind the Cross Patriarch of their admittedly insane deal. This wasn't the time to score points.

"Let's give Calabast an opportunity to explain what she has discovered." Ves gestured to the woman's projection.

"Thank you, patriarch." Calabast said in a serious tone. Her usual playfulness was entirely absent this time. "Let me begin by summarizing how we managed to find proof of an incoming threat. It all started as soon as we began to communicate with the dwarven patrol captain. Although dwarves are substantially different from normal humans, their body language and facial tics are largely the same. I immediately judged that the Ferril patrol officer harbored greater hostility towards us than normal."

That had led her and her Black Cats to leverage the advanced hacking capabilities of the Blinding Banshee to breach the dwarven frigate's security systems.

It was quite impressive that they managed to intrude into the systems of a military vessel without alarming their targets. Though it took plenty of time, Calabast and her analysts managed to gather various clues that the situation was not quite right. Once they managed to breach into the encrypted communication system and read the dwarf captain's secret correspondence, she finally found proof to back up her suspicions!

Calabast spent a few minutes presenting key pieces of evidence. Unless the communication was faked, which was extremely unlikely due to all of the circumstantial evidence that the Black Cats had gathered, the Ferril Provincial Army was truly out on a warpath against the Golden Skull Alliance!

"What I don't understand is why the dwarves are targeting us." Venerable Brutus frowned. "What did we do that offends them so much?"

"We offended them by being humans. Nothing more." Ves dourly answered. "These dwarves are so prejudiced against tall folk that they don't need to find a good excuse to whip up their soldiers to attack us. Just our height is enough of a reason to desire our destruction."

"Ahem." Calabast softly cleared her throat. "My analysts have attempted to understand the situation of the Ferril Province in these last twenty minutes. From what we know, previous human trading fleets that entered the Vulcan Empire had indeed delivered crown terrorists to the doorsteps of the dwarves. However, the terrorist attacks amounted to little more than crashing shuttles into ships, detonating bombs on space stations and dropping space junk into the atmosphere of settled planets. These are serious incidents but less than a thousand dwarves have actually lost their lives throughout the Vulcan Empire."

This was a trivial amount of losses relative to the size of the dwarven state. The main reason for that was because there weren't many foreign trading fleets with MTA passes to begin with. The amount of deadly incidents that unfolded amounted to less than a dozen attempts.

"So the dwarves are overreacting just because of a thousand deaths?" Patriarch Reginald frowned.

"Humans are demonized in the Vulcan Empire. Our perceived threat is far greater than our actual threat in the eyes of the dwarves. There are also multiple strong factions within his state that have a high interest in whipping up the Vulcanites against the humans. They have deliberately manipulated the media to paint human visitors like us as dwarf killers. The result of all of this is that a huge majority of Ferrils including its leaders consider us to be an incoming attack force. It doesn't help that we have brought far more combat assets than a typical trading fleet."

Ves groaned and pressed his fingers against his forehead. "These stupid dwarves! They've fallen into conspiracy theory! Our itinerary doesn't even bring us close to any dwarven population center! We just need to go in and out of their territory without exposing us to any potential dangers. Why couldn't they have at least talked to us before deciding to take us down?"

There wasn't sense in discussing the motives of Ferrils. It was quite troublesome to mobilize three entire mech divisions at once and task them with intercepting a powerful foreign fleet on short notice.

Everyone just had to accept that the dwarves were committed to an attack and respond accordingly.

"If we end up in battle against this incoming dwarven fleet, what do we have to defend our fleet?" Ves asked.

"We can deploy roughly 12,000 mechs or six mech regiments worth of combat mechs." General Verle replied. "We actually have double the amount of mech pilots but not enough machines to put them in the field."

Ves winced when he heard that. This was a fault that he was very much aware of. Though his clan made some attempts to expand the amount of mech carrying capacity in the fleet, it didn't make much sense to acquire more sub-capital ships at this juncture. The current climate also made it a lot harder to acquire combat carriers from the open market.

"Our Glory Seekers can deploy around 5,000 mechs at this time." Marshal Ariadne spoke up next.

"The Cross Clan can contribute up to 6,000 mechs for this battle." Patriarch Reginald simply answered.

These were slightly better numbers than Ves expected. Both the Glory Seekers and the Crossers worked hard to recover from the losses they incurred from the Battle of Reckoning. They even managed to expand past their original troop levels and start this coming engagement on a much stronger footing than in the past!

However, Ves began to ask another critical question.

"How many expert mechs can we muster?"

General Verle grimaced. "Four. Our Larkinson Clan still has two expert pilots without their own expert mechs."

"None. We are still waiting for you to develop an expert mech for Venerable Brutus." Marshal Ariadne said and gestured to the quiet expert pilot sitting by her side.

Patriarch Reginald also looked grim. "Three."

That was seven in total, which could be either good or bad.

It all depended on how many expert mechs the dwarven punitive fleet had brought. Everyone turned to Calabast once again.

"What can you tell us about our pursuers?"

Chapter 3226: Breaking the Status Quo

A sword hung over the expeditionary fleet. The Fordilla Zentra System which had never played host to anything important was about to become the site of a major battle.

In fact, if neither side chose to avoid the coming confrontation, the anticipated battle would likely become the largest conflict between dwarves and humans since the Vulcanites took over the entire Smiling Samuel Star Sector!

The magnitude of this destructive event couldn't be overstated. Pitting tens of thousands of human mechs against an even greater number of dwarven mechs would definitely lead to a huge amount of casualties.

The fact that the combat assets of both sides were based on fleets meant that the casualty figure could rapidly skyrocket to the hundreds of thousands!

After all, those mech pilots weren't able to service their mechs, take care of their own medical treatment, travel to the battlefield and perform many other essential functions.

The Golden Skull Alliance did not doubt the intelligence that the Ferril Provincial Army mobilized and dispatched three full-strength mech divisions at once. In fact, Ves and several other people feared that the Vulcanites may have mobilized even more forces without informing the belligerent dwarven patrol captain!

Fortunately, Calabast offered an encouraging guess.

"According to our judgement, the Ferril provincial authorities are likely acting on their own initiative." Her projection stated.

"What makes you say that?" Ves curiously asked.

"First, out of all of the provinces of the Vulcan Empire, Ferril has already garnered a reputation for being unruly. Its population is always angry at something and its leaders regularly play into that. Second, attacking us has serious consequences for not just the Ferril Province but also the empire as a whole. You might not be aware of it, but the other provinces aren't as impulsive. There are many dwarven politicians and statesmen who possess calmer heads. They would never attack a fleet covered by the MTA when

they depend on the Association's guarantee themselves. This is a transaction that will lead to far more losses than gains."

"If that's the case, then what has possessed the Ferrils to pursue such a stupid transaction anyway?" General Verle frowned.

Calabast leaned back in her chair and offered the people in the emergency meeting a grim smile.

"It's quite simple. In the warped arithmetic of the Ferrils, this transaction is profitable for them. Although it is not easy for us to determine their full reasoning based on mostly public sources, we have gathered enough clues to construct a reasonable picture."

This must be good. Ves trusted Calabast's judgement. If she was ready to say something, then she must have a good degree of confidence in the intelligence she presented.

Calabast waved a hand. A territorial map of the Vulcan Empire appeared into view.

"The Vulcan Empire is similar in nature to the Garlen Empire, only with less open infighting but with the same degree of internal division. The Vulcanites may share much in common, but that does not stop them from competing against each other. Since it is unlikely for their empire to engage in hostilities against nearby human states anytime soon, they need a different target to channel their competitive urges. That has led to a climate where dwarves try to outdo other dwarves based on the territories they are based in. The Ferrils are a proud folk, but they don't have the power and prestige to match the likes of the Uriburns or other powerful Vulcanite sub-groups. This makes them far more eager to build up their prestige and standing within dwarven society."

"And they think that violating one of the MTA's rules and attacking a peaceful human fleet without a reasonable cause is the right way to go about it?" Ves skeptically asked.

"That's why there are more factors at play than just the desire of the Ferrils to prove themselves to be more aggressive and daring than other Vulcanites." His spymaster answered. "The religious fervor in the Ferril Province has recently shifted over from the traditional Vulcan Faith to the Dwarven God Cult. The latter has gained the upper hand in recent years, especially among the commoner dwarves. The upper ranks have been slow to convert to the trend, and that has them worried. By launching this extreme action, the current rulers will gain a huge amount of support from the population, thereby providing them a lot more assurances that they will stay in power."

So it was a political calculus. Figures. Ves had witnessed too many instances where politicians were willing to betray any principle and betray any friend as long as they got ahead somehow. They rarely cared about the damage and suffering they inflicted to many other people.

Of all of the possible reasons to go on an attack, a religious motivation was the worst case. It didn't matter if some of the decision makers were sincere in their faith or not. As long as a huge amount of fanatical believers wanted to kill humans at all costs, then it was impossible to have any second thoughts!

"When I asked for Minister Shederin Purnesse's judgement, he told me that this attack may not be as spontaneous and impulsive as it seems." Calabast continued. "He believes we have gotten caught in a high-level game between the Vulcan Faith and the Dwarven God Cult. The latter is known to be more xenophobic towards tall folk and advocates for a more aggressive stance. That does not sit well with the traditionalists as their main concern is to maintain the prosperity that the dwarven rebels have attained after shedding a lot of blood. One of the most effective ways to break the status quo is to shock it with such a great incident that the old ways can no longer be maintained."

Attacking the expeditionary fleet would definitely induce the shock the Dwarven God cultists needed. The price was high, but true believers had the annoying habit of overestimating their gains and disregarding the costs of their actions.

"So the Ferrils, Dwarven God cultists or some other ambitious faction within the Vulcan Empire is trying to intensify the contradictions between dwarves and humans, is that correct?" Professor Benedict asked in a displeased tone.

It galled the Senior Mech Designer quite a lot that he was being plotted against! It had been a long time since anyone dared to implicate him in a scheme.

Calabast pressed her lips. "That's an understatement. Both Minister Shederin and I agree that it is likely that a group of highly-placed dwarven radicals are trying to agitate their fellow people against the tall folk. The three mech divisions dispatched by the Ferril Provincial Army should also be deliberately selected to execute this mission. You can expect the incoming dwarven soldiers to be fanatic and committed enough to go through with their attack. The chance that we can negotiate a way out is minimal."

Though the Vulcan Empire and the Ferril Province were both huge, it was not a trivial matter to mobilize three whole mech divisions. Smiling Samuel was currently in a state of peace. Tensions may have risen as of late, but that was far from enough for the dwarves to go on a war footing. It was already an impressive feat to be able to consolidate and throw out a fleet that was large enough to accommodate 30,000 mechs on short notice.

As for why the Larkinsons were sure that this was an attack prepared in haste? That was because the expeditionary fleet did not determine its route and destination until more than a week ago! No one could be certain whether the human visitors would pass through the territory of the Ferril Province until recently.

This at least gave the Golden Skull Alliance some assurances that they wouldn't have to fight against more units aside from the three mech divisions that were already on their

way. Of course, this situation was bound to change after a battle, so the human visitors should never forget that they were still behind enemy lines!

Considering the current scenario and the various choices available to them, the leaders of the alliance all chose to meet the Ferrils in combat.

Patriarch Reginald looked indignant. "We can't show weakness to these bloodthirsty dwarves. I have been pursued before, so I know when it is necessary to fight. Right now, our opposition is still within a controllable range, but if we choose to run, the Ferrils may call upon further reinforcements and bring in more hostile dwarven troops. If we aren't careful, we might get caught by twice or thrice the number of enemy troops a week later."

By defeating the current dwarven troops, the expeditionary fleet would not only reduce the pressure that was right behind its back, but also make it harder for the Vulcanites to corner the humans. In case any hostile dwarven fleet was able to force a battle, then the Golden Skull Alliance was at least able to deal with the Vulcanites in piecemeal rather than all at once.

Of course, there was still hope that they may be able to avert conflict. Minister Shederin and his people were already attempting to contact the MTA, the Vulcan Empire, the Vulcain Faith, the Empire of the Lost and other stakeholders in the hopes that someone might be able to yank the leash of the Ferrils.

The leaders could not pin their hopes on a diplomatic solution, though. The preparations for combat still had to proceed.

After Calabast finished briefing the leaders of the alliance on the political context of the Ferril attack, everyone turned their attention back to the troops that they may have to fight against.

Know your enemy and know yourself. The Ferrils thought they still maintained the advantage of surprise, but they weren't aware that their targets already sniffed out the ambush.

Since the Ferrils most certainly investigated the humans they wanted to attack, the Larkinsons, Glory Seekers and Crossers had to do the same in order to negate the information disadvantage and put their forces on a better footing. The more they were able to learn about their upcoming opponents, the more they could prepare.

By now, enough time had passed for the Black Cats to present a preliminary report on the enemy troop disposition.

"Based on both public and private sources, we managed to identify and gather basic details on the three Ferril mech divisions arrayed against us." Calabast smiled. "We are

85 percent confident that the Ferril Provincial Army has dispatched its 7th, 34th and 67th mech divisions."

She activated a projection that displayed various footage of the aforementioned dwarven mech divisions.

"The 7th mech division, also known as the Molten Hammers, is one of the oldest units that existed before the Ferril Province even came into being. It possesses the most combat experience and has the richest martial traditions out of the three mech divisions. As you can see in the footage, the Molten Hammers is a heavy assault regiment. It fields a disproportionate amount of dwarven space knights and other supporting machines to engage in brutal frontal attacks. They're specialized in siege breaking and have a reputation to be extremely difficult to put down."

Ves and the others did not look when they learned about the Molten Hammers. Though it was lacking in light and maneuverable mechs, the 7th fielded mechs that looked so tough and heavily-armored that it would take far too much effort to shoot them down from a safe distance.

"The 34th Mech Division is not as old and storied as the 7th, but the Slug Rangers are well-funded and well-practiced. It is a predominantly range-focused mech regiment that has a penchant for deploying a large amount of gauss rifle, nail driver and other direct kinetic energy weapons. They are known to work frequently alongside the Molten Hammers in war games so the cooperation between the two should be good."

The Slug Rangers may have an ugly name, but their formidable-looking ranged mechs were no joke. They fielded dedicated mech regiments centered around rifleman mechs, cannoner mechs and artillery mechs. Their weight of fire was enormous and could easily chew apart entire fleets at medium range!

"What about the last mech division?"

"The 67th Mech Division is a little more special." Calabast said. "Unlike the other two, the Hivar Roarers exclusively fields bestial mechs. The 67th's mech roster is much more diverse and can fulfill a variety of roles. They will likely fulfill the role of scouts, skirmishers, flankers and troubleshooters in the upcoming battle."

That was bad news to everyone. The Hivar Roarers plugged one of the greatest weaknesses of the Molten Hammers and the Slug Rangers. If the incoming dwarven attack force consisted entirely of thick but less maneuverable mechs, then the Golden Skull Alliance could easily outflank the enemy and attack them where they were weak... The presence of lighter forces made it a lot harder to exploit this vulnerability.

Chapter 3227: Venerable Orthox De Massie

None of the three mech divisions looked like pushovers. They were well-funded and enjoyed the backing of a state that always emphasized strength.

If the Ferrils wanted to surpass the wealthier and more powerful provinces of the Vulcan Empire, then they were obligated to invest in their military forces!

It would be a farce if the Ferril Province thought it could climb on top of other provinces if it didn't have the troops to support its ambitions.

As Ves and the others began to read through the extensive information package provided by Calabast and other intelligence sources, they all gained a depressing outlook towards their probable opposition.

"These dwarven troops are no weaker than the mech regiments we barely managed to overcome during the Battle of Reckoning." General Verle judged. "The quality of the dwarven mech pilots may be worse, but they are better organized since they are being deployed as complete mech divisions in proper fleets."

The opposition the Larkinsons faced during the Battle of Reckoning was special because the enemy performed a deep strike attack. The Fridaymen were operating far beyond their usual territory and had no choice but to limit their troop choices and send them out in specialized deep strike fleet carriers.

This time, the enemy was operating on their home turf. Even if the expeditionary fleet only intended to fly along the outskirts of the Ferril Province, the provincial army didn't have to work under difficult circumstances.

The only real problem was the lack of preparation time. The dwarven troops had to ready themselves for battle without much time to form targeted countermeasures against the Golden Skull Alliance.

Despite this little detail, the odds still didn't look good for the Golden Skull Alliance. The expeditionary fleet may be able to muster 23,000 second-class mechs at this point in time, but the enemy task force brought at least 7,000 more mechs to the party!

This difference was quite big and could not be overcome with ease.

As the mech designers in the meeting, both Ves and Professor Benedict focused their attention on the mech models employed by the three mech divisions.

One of the first points that stood out to them was that the Molten Hammers and the Slug Rangers were all oriented towards a single combat purpose.

The mech regiments of the 7th Mech Division all fielded a variety of heavy mechs, defensive mechs and other machines that supported its siege breaking function.

The mech regiments of the 34th Mech Division did not field any significant number of melee mechs. Their mechs all consisted of ranged mechs as if they did not worry at all about needing their vulnerable machines from close-ranged attackers.

This was a typical setup for war-oriented units. By eschewing diversity and narrowing their focus to their singular purpose, the mech units became extremely good at the job they were supposed to fulfill, which was extremely helpful in wars and large-scale battles.

Of course, the downside of this was that the mech divisions concentrated so much on a single approach that they crashed really hard if the enemy did not play the same game.

The dwarven generals were not ignorant of this vulnerability. This was why they assigned the newer 67th Mech Division to the ambush force as well.

At first glance, the Hivar Roarers looked like a metal menagerie. The 67th featured an eclectic mix of bestial mechs that were based around a variety of animal shapes. Most of them were avian but there were also tiger mechs, turtle mechs, spider mechs and more exotic machines.

Though it was a lot harder for the Hivar Roarers to excel in a single purpose, the variety and diversity of their bestial mechs allowed them to respond to many different situations.

"I don't see many other ways for a task force that consists of these three mech divisions to attack us in anything other than a straightforward frontal assault." Ves noted as he pointed at the depictions of the armored but relatively sluggish mechs of the 7th. "A mech force moves as fast as its slowest element. The Molten Hammer mechs are so slow that they can't do much except accelerate forward if they want to catch up to our fleet."

"The Slug Ranger mechs are also slow for their type. Their ranged mechs are thicker than the norm, but that comes at the cost of mobility. They're not dogfighters. They're armored gunners." Professor Benedict added.

General Verle smiled. "This factor limits the tactical flexibility of the opposing force. The dwarves probably won't split their forces and attempt to attack us on different flanks. They don't have the speed to envelop our ships."

The common attributes of the Molten Hammers and the Slug Rangers made it incredibly obvious on how the Ferrils planned to attack the expeditionary fleet, but that didn't offer much reassurances to everyone.

The Molten Hammers were too tough and could bull through any defensive lines by relying on brute force! As long as they were able to employ all of their strengths, then it didn't matter if their strategies and tactics lacked finesse. A single knock-out punch was enough to defeat an opponent!

Various people made a few more remarks about the enemy mechs. Although they didn't have any access to insider details, the Vulcanites weren't shy about parading their military forces. Like peacocks, they regularly showed off their combat troops in public in order to show how impressive they were. The Ferril Provincial Army was especially guilty of this, so the Black Cats managed to harvest a lot of recent and accurate public sightings of the dwarven combat assets.

There was one issue, though.

Venerable Brutus brought the matter to everyone's attention.

"I do not see much material related to the expert mechs and expert pilots of the Ferril Provincial Army."

Calabast shook her head. "The Vulcanites are much more careful about exposing the details of their high-level combat assets. We cannot say with confidence how many expert mechs each enemy mech division is able to field. In our more pessimistic scenarios, we expect each dwarven mech regiment to field one expert mech in battle."

That amounted to 15 expert mechs which was more than double the amount of expert mechs that the Golden Skull Alliance was able to field!

Ves silently groaned. This was the Battle of Reckoning all over again but worse. Since the Larkinsons, Glory Seekers and Crossers were outnumbered by 7,000 mechs, they didn't have any extra assets to spare to block and whittle the surplus enemy expert mechs!

Though this wasn't enough for him to give up on this battle straight away, the mood in the conference room had definitely plummeted despite the fact that only Ves was physically present.

Patriarch Reginald did not look as pessimistic. He looked as if he still had confidence in winning the battle despite the heavy numerical disadvantage.

"I see you still managed to obtain details about a handful of their expert pilots."

Calabast nodded. "The Ferril Provincial Army has to put at least a number of its notable champions in the public eye in order to inspire the population. Expert pilots make for good heroes and are always able to boost recruitment. We believe that they are all the strongest of their respective mech divisions."

She began to present the dwarven heroes one by one, starting with a dwarf with a rich brown beard who was known to pilot a formidable expert space knight.

"Let's start with what will likely be our strongest individual opponent. Venerable Orthox De Massie is one of the few active expert pilots who took part in the rebellion that led to the founding of the Vulcan Empire. He is not particularly devout but he is a vocal dwarf supremacist. As an older expert pilot who experienced true war, he has only grown stronger ever since. Though no sources have ever confirmed that he is a high-tier expert pilot, it is likely that he has reached this level of strength. His expert mech, the Gatecrasher, is much more imposing than typical machines."

The two expert pilots in the meeting studied Venerable Orthox's information in great detail. The dwarven expert pilot's record featured a lot of impressive accomplishments, though much of them happened early in his career. Despite the long period of relative peace, neither Brutus nor Reginald felt the dwarven expert pilot had stagnated after the rebellion.

"He's a true warrior." Patriarch Reginald issued his judgement. "He's not a battle maniac but a crusader. He believes in his cause with all his heart and is willing to fight to the utmost of his ability to achieve his goals. This level of conviction is rare even among other expert pilots. I can see it in his eyes that he is not any weaker than myself."

That was a heavy announcement and one that further depressed the confidence of Ves and the others.

They all hoped that the enemy mech force would only dispatch ordinary expert pilots. Not so. With at least one expert pilot that was able to match Patriarch Reginald, the Cross Patriarch wouldn't be able to leverage his impressive martial prowess against weaker opponents!

When everyone studied Venerable Orthox's expert mech, some of them became even more discouraged.

"That's an impressive high-tier expert mech." Ves couldn't help but admit. "It is the most wonderful implementation of an offensive knight mech that I have ever seen."

As someone who designed an offensive knight mech or two, he knew what they were all about. The Gatecrasher might be shorter and stockier than normal humanoid mechs, but that also turned it into something akin to a giant projectile that could charge and smash straight through nearly every solid obstacle!

The thickly-armored space knight that was coated in lava red was clearly not designed to remain passive and soak up attacks. It exuded pure aggressive as its powerful but well-protected flight system excelled in accelerating the Gatecrasher on a straight trajectory.

Its designers obviously gave up on making maneuverability its strong point. Instead, the dwarven mech designers tried their best to turn the Gatecrasher into a literal battering ram! Whether it slammed in a formation of mechs or a solid ship hull, there was little that was able to block its thunderous charge!

"It's like a supercharged version of a lancer mech but without a sharp and pointy tip." Venerable Brutus commented.

"Not quite." Professor Benedict disagreed. "While the Gatecrasher is indeed designed for charges, its close-combat dueling capabilities are also formidable. Both its hammer and shield can be used to bash and bludgeon any opponent in range. If the enemy is too fast, then it can launch its special grappling hooks mounted on its frame to catch an elusive opponent."

Ves nodded in agreement. "I don't think our expert light skirmishers will be able to eliminate it by targeting its weak points. It is more mobile than an equivalent defensive space knight and its rear is much better armored than necessary. It's a mech that can hold its ground even when it is attacked on all sides."

The Gatecrasher's concept sounded very familiar to him. It reminded him of Venerable Orfan's Riot.

Both expert mechs attempted to perform the same role, though the Gatecrasher was much better at its job.

"Does it have any weaknesses?" Marshal Ariadne asked with a troubled face.

"It doesn't appear to be armed with serious ranged weapon systems." Ves answered. "It might carry a backup pistol or something but there is little about the design that suggests it can keep up with other expert ranged mechs. That said, its defenses are so high that it can endure any bombardment for a long amount of time."

If the Gatecrasher couldn't be taken out early, then the Golden Skull Alliance had no choice but to fight against Venerable Orthox on his terms! There was no other solution to neutralize the Gatecrasher's threat except to block it with another expert mech, one that was powerful enough to constrain an expert pilot and expert mech of this caliber.

Patriarch Reginald looked increasingly eager to test his skills against another formidable warrior.

"Venerable Orthox is mine. You do not need to concern yourself with him. I will never allow the Gatecrasher to penetrate our lines as long as I still stand... That is a promise."

Chapter 3228: Dwarven Heroes

Venerable Orthox De Massie was by far the most threatening known quantity in the enemy mech force.

Any mech pilot who fought during the dwarven rebellion were truly battle-hardened. The conditions for the rebel soldiers back then were so difficult that they had to rely on grit, determination and a willingness to sacrifice a lot of lives in order to defeat the established human powers.

As a survivor of this meat grinder, Venerable Orthox not only managed to survive the war, but thrive during the period of rapid growth and consolidation. Being able to strengthen his will during times of peace was a clear indicator that this was a warrior who never gave up and always prepared for the next fight even if it was decades away!

Every mech pilot who managed to grow stronger did so because they thought it was necessary. This was easy to maintain in times of war but a lot harder to sustain when there wasn't an obvious need to fight.

Even expert pilots were able to lose their edge after a long period of stagnation. Time was one of their greatest threats. It was difficult to defend against the consequences of the passage of time.

Perhaps Orthox may have grown past his physical peak, but his extraordinarily powerful will was more than threatening enough to compensate for that. In any case, expert pilots relied on their expert mechs to fight so a weaker body was not that big of a deal.

Patriarch Reginald already looked forward to meeting the dwarven high-tier expert pilot in single combat. Perhaps the Cross Patriarch thought that an earnest duel against an equally powerful opponent would be sufficient to push him past the final limit that held him back from becoming an ace pilot.

Though Ves and the others were glad that Patriarch Reginald volunteered to block Venerable Orthox and the Gatecrasher, there were numerous other notable expert pilots among the dwarves.

Every expert pilot the Ferrils showed off in public had to be good enough to impress their audience. There were no rookies or weaklings among their public heroes.

Calabast quickly went through the other four notable dwarven expert pilots.

"Venerable Leiva Hinder is the quintessential slug ranger. She is a mid-tier expert pilot who pilots an expert heavy artillery mech called the Gauss Baron."

Venerable Leiva's portrait showed off the visage of a ferocious, red-haired middle-aged dwarven woman. Her eyes radiated the bloodthirstiness of killers. She looked as if she was more than willing to shoot up an entire space station just to sate her need to kill!

Everyone focused on her expert mech next.

"As its name suggests, the Gauss Baron is built around its set of eight powerful gauss cannons. Each of them are built to some of the highest standards that the Vulcan Empire can develop at their size. While we haven't been able to find out if the Gauss Baron carries other weapon systems, it's best to assume it is hiding a couple of surprises."

The Gauss Baron looked incredibly formidable. It was already bad enough to face a powerful heavy artillery mech in a spaceborn battlefield with no natural cover on the battlefield. It was even worse when it came in the form of an expert mech that looked like it could crush any standard mech with each shot it fired!

"Hmmm, according to this data, this expert mech's gauss cannons feature high impact, high penetration and high muzzle velocity. It excels at destroying large, relatively immobile targets such as starships but it can also suppress light skirmishers at range due to its abundant amount of cannons. The only real limitations that I can see are its low firing rate and the limited ammunition capacity of the Gauss Baron."

"Ammunition and other supplies are easy enough to replenish with enough support." Ves commented. "If it functions as a bunker mech, then it can easily rely on the carrier to provide additional gauss rounds on demand. If it is deployed in space, then a retinue of support mechs will be able to carry all of the gauss rounds it needs. For an organized mech army, lack of ammunition capacity is not a real detriment."

Venerable Brutus looked incredibly serious at this expert mech. Without a comparable machine that could compete against any expert mech, he was unable to do anything to stop its destructive firepower.

"This Gauss Baron is an even greater threat than the Gatecrasher in my opinion." The Hexer expert pilot said. "The Gatecrasher may be a high-tier expert mech, but its effective range stretches up to a hundred meters or less. The Gauss Baron on the other hand can inflict crippling damage many kilometers away. In fact, it can effectively threaten our capital ships at distances far beyond conventional ranges as long as it has the rounds to spare. It's a one-mech sieging army."

Although that latter part was a bit of an exaggeration, his point was still valid. Brutus rightfully highlighted the possibility for the Gauss Baron to win this battle single-handedly by inflicting catastrophic damage before the proper battle even began!

Ves slapped his palm against the conference table. "We need to take it out straight away. We can't let such a huge source of firepower run amok throughout the entire

engagement. Each minute it remains active it can kill another ship or damage one of our expert mechs."

"During the Battle of Reckoning, we managed to overpower the enemy's strongest ranged assets." General Verle reminded everyone. "This was one of the key factors why we were able to achieve victory. Our ranged mechs and our Transcendent Punishers in particular were able to continually suppress and whittle down the enemy mechs without too much interference. If we don't stop Venerable Leiva soon enough, she will be able to do as much damage as all of our Transcendent Punishers put together!"

Everyone looked at each other for a moment.

"The dwarves will do their best to protect the Gauss Baron." Marshal Ariadne Wodin said with certainty. "It will either be deployed in a special bunker that is built especially for this expert mech, or it will be deployed in space but under heavy guard by the Molten Hammers. No matter what, all of our attempts to attack the Gauss Baron must first go through multiple layers of defense."

The Golden Skull Alliance not only had to overcome all of the external defenses, but also punch through the expert heavy artillery mech's own defenses! Its immense size and bulk already suggested that both its resonance shield and armor system were almost just as tough as that of a heavy space knight!

General Verle turned to Ves. "Can the Amaranto take out the Gauss Baron by itself?"

"That's... highly unlikely." Ves reluctantly replied. "The Amaranto's fully-powered shot is incredibly powerful and can negate specific forms of defense, but if the Gauss Baron is hiding behind multiple layers of defense, then that can bleed a lot of energy even before a beam actually hits this artillery mech. Even if a shot manages to penetrate Venerable Leiva's expert mech, it is too large not to incorporate a high degree of redundancy and compartmentalization. Even if half of its frame is shot to pieces, it can probably continue to fire most of its cannons."

The discussion continued for a little while until General Verle finally set aside this topic.

"We can't determine our response until we can finally get a good look at the enemy fleet and mech deployment. The Gauss Baron is a singularly powerful threat, but it is not the only one we need to be worried about."

Calabast nodded. "The Hivar Roarers also have a champion of their own. Venerable Merek Bulfuron is a relatively young expert pilot but possesses a great deal of talent. He has quickly risen up to become a mid-tier expert pilot. He is also noted for his religious fervor. He is a strong adherent of the Dwarven God Cult, which in the past might have landed him in trouble but is now a strong point in his favor. The Paravad he pilots is an avian expert medium marauder mech that is fast, flexible and capable of fighting at different ranges depending on the circumstances."

The Paravad was basically a multipurpose expert mech that was shaped like a bird. Similar to other marauder mechs such as the Valkyrie Redeemer, the Paravad excelled at flanking, ranged harassment and hit-and-run attacks.

The biggest difference was that Venerable Merek was able to perform this function at the expert mech level, which was a lot more threatening and difficult to defend against.

Ves could already envision the Paravad operating independently or at the head of a dedicated mobile flanking force. This detached dwarven unit would probably function as one of the few independent elements that was free to sneak around the back of the expeditionary fleet and threaten the vulnerable civilian ships at the rear!

Perhaps the Paravad did not excel at frontal combat as other expert mechs, but it didn't need to be. Its ability to maneuver around the Golden Skull Alliance's defenses and hit its weak points was an incredibly alarming prospect!

All in all, these three dwarven heroes exerted a huge amount of pressure onto Golden Skull Alliance. The different strengths of the three dwarven expert pilots and their respective expert mechs were so formidable that the Larkinsons and so on had to prepare specific responses for each of them. If not, any of these powerful expert pilots could single-handedly overturn the entire battle and tilt the battle in the favor of the Ferrils!

Calabast wasn't able to name any further notable dwarven expert pilots even though they had to exist. It was likely that they were low-tier expert pilots and not really worth publicizing.

Though no expert pilot with an expert mech was a pushover, they should at least be a little more manageable in battle.

After discussing a few more preliminary battle plans, the meeting ended. It was convened in haste and everyone barely made any preparations at this time. Calabast also needed a lot more time to gather relevant and reliable intelligence. Since many details had yet to be determined, it was better to save the detailed battle planning for later.

"How much time do we have?" Ves asked.

Calabast shrugged. "That's difficult to determine, but we should have at least a couple of hours at our disposal. I suggest you prepare as much as possible. Don't hold anything back. If the Ferrils have done their homework, then they must have definitely taken both our numbers and our previous battle performances into account."

"Are they aware of the capabilities we have shown during the Battle of Reckoning?"

This was a dreadful possibility. If some of the trump cards that his clan had recently shown became exposed, then that would heavily limit their effectiveness in the upcoming battle!

The spymaster offered Ves an encouraging smile. "I think the dwarves don't have any details. The Fridaymen is probably more than willing to share its logs and battle footage of the Battle of Reckoning to anyone that is willing to attack us. The problem is that the Vulcanites hate humans. They will never ask the Fridaymen for assistance."

"What if the Fridaymen approach the Vulcanites on their own initiative and proactively share their data?"

"That is even more unlikely." Calabast chuckled. "Though we have already found out about the attack, don't forget that it is a secret operation. There is no word about it on the galactic net and the Ferril Province has not publicized or leaked out any obvious intention of turning against us. Besides, I doubt the Fridaymen are paying attention to us these days. We have moved too far away from their sphere of influence."

This was good news if it was true. Though Ves was aware that a lot of rumors were floating around on the galactic net, it was difficult to distinguish truth from fiction. The Fridaymen and the Garlener clans that participated in the battle weren't generous enough to broadcast their own humiliating defeat to the rest of the galaxy.

Ves smirked... All hope was not yet lost. As long as the dwarves didn't have a solid idea of what his clan's battle networks were capable of, then the Larkinson Army at least retained one powerful advantage over their foes!

Chapter 3229: Steel Rain

The smell of battle was in the air. No one in the expeditionary fleet was able to escape the likely possibility that they were about to get embroiled in combat!

It had been a long time since the Larkinson Clan as a whole actually encountered a significant threat. The majority of clansmen who had just joined up in the last year didn't know what to do for a while.

"What are we going to do?!"

"I didn't sign up for this!"

"Why aren't we evacuating civilians like us? We don't belong on the battlefield!"

"I told you guys that entering the Vulcan Empire was suicide!"

"Venerable Jannzi was right!"

An explosion of panic erupted among many Larkinsons, particularly the civilian members who were never trained for combat. Though they were warned many times that the Larkinson Clan tended to get into trouble now and then, they hadn't anticipated that this would come true this soon.

The expeditionary fleet hadn't even reached the Red Ocean? Since many people considered the Milky Way Galaxy to be relatively safe and orderly, a lot of clansmen simply couldn't accept that the clan came under threat despite not violating any laws or provoking any locals.

What did they do to deserve this treatment?

Fortunately, the panic and uncertainty among the Larkinsons did not last. The clan had already anticipated this reaction and deployed numerous soldiers and officials to reassure their fellow Larkinsons and maintain peace.

"Quiet down! You rookies haven't seen anything yet!" A veteran Living Sentinel mech pilot shouted at a crowd in Dawn City on the Vivacious Wal. "Back in my day, 50 percent casualties were the norm, but we're a lot stronger now. So what if the dwarves are barreling down on us with three mech divisions? They should have sent at least six if they want to have a chance of beating us! We've got the best mechs and the strongest weapons imaginable! Don't underestimate our patriarch. He's able to pull out one trick after another."

"Believe in our expert pilots!" An Ylvainan preacher shouted on top of a crate in New Dorum on the Spirit of Bentheim. "The apostles who walk among us are blessed by the Great Prophet and the Bright Martyr! With Prophet Ylvaine's guidance and the Bright Martyr's blessed war machines, our clan shall vanquish any enemy that seeks to stop our ascensions. Have faith and pray to the dwarven souls that shall soon be redeemed at our hands!"

While the Larkinson Clan was being stabilized, its armed forces were all gearing up for battle. The Larkinson Army may have absorbed a lot of newcomers as well, but none of them displayed any of the panic of their civilian brethren.

The soldiers recruited into the mech legions had all been screened beforehand. None of them possessed feeble minds and shaky hearts. Even the youngest mech pilots who were still in their twenties were able to maintain their courage when a great threat loomed over their heads.

The presence of glows and the influence of the Larkinson Network helped a lot with firming up the confidence and sense of duty of the servicemen.

However, the greatest contributor was the presence of many seasoned veterans among the soldiers. As far as the participants of the Battle against the Abyss, the Battle of Reckoning and so on were concerned, this was just another tuesday. Their unflappable

demeanors, their belief in the strength of their clan and their stability under pressure played a pivotal role in keeping morale among the soldiers high.

"The dwarves are tough, but we are tougher."

"The Superior Mother is on our side!"

"This is just a warm-up exercise. If we can't even beat the best of what the Vulcan Empire has to offer, how can we possibly think about finding our fortune in the Red Ocean?"

The veterans among the Avatars of Myth, Living Sentinels and so on constantly ensured that the many recruits that had joined the mech legions remained stable. The old timers all knew that these fresh mech pilots needed all of the support they could get because the pressure on their shoulders would grow unimaginably high during the heat of combat.

Despite all of their encouragement, the veteran Larkinsons were not so upbeat about the upcoming confrontation. The clan had not massaged any details about the foe they were about to face. The soldiers had extensive access to much of the verified information that Calabast had managed to collect about the incoming dwarven fleet.

The picture didn't look good. Fighting against 30,000 military-grade mechs was already a difficult prospect. The uncertainty surrounding the number of enemy expert mechs they might encounter was gnawing in the minds of every survivor of the Battle of Reckoning.

Back then, just a handful of expert mechs managed to unleash a massacre that ended the lives of far too many Larkinsons!

There were so many different threats among the Fury Hammers, Slug Rangers and Hivar Roarers that the planners of the mech legions were pulling their hairs out. They had to come with a range of different solutions for every high-priority threat among the dwarves.

During a planning session organized by the Larkinson Clan's newest mech legion, Commander Taon Melin looked grimly at the gathered Ylvainans.

"We have a tough battle ahead. As the artillery legion of the Larkinson Clan, it is our sacred duty to provide the firepower support that is crucial to stopping the dwarves. However, before we can stop the advance of dangerous dwarven mech such as the Molten Hammers, we must first defeat our counterparts among the dwarven force."

The conference table projected images and footage of the 34th Slug Rangers. From the dreaded Gauss Baron to its formidable array of artillery mechs, the dwarven mech division possessed a range of threatening ranged units.

One of the most acute threats was a mech regiment where Venerable Leiva Hinder came from. The Steel Rain mech regiment only consisted of 1000 artillery mechs, but that already represented a huge amount of firepower!

"According to our intelligence sources, the Steel Rain possesses the highest firepower out of all of the mech regiments of the Slug Ranger mech division." Taon continued as the projection showcased numerous variations of the same line of dwarven heavy artillery mechs. "Every Slug Ranger mech pilot has to serve in the other mech regiments first before they become eligible to join the Steel Rain. The elite mech regiment only selects the best and most resilient Slug Rangers to become a part of its ranks."

The projection then showed a preliminary analysis on the three known heavy artillery mech models utilized by the Steel Rain.

"As you can see, the Steel Rain employs three variations of the same dwarven heavy artillery mech design. They are largely identical to each other except for the caliber and amount of cannons."

Taon pointed at the model with the biggest guns.

"The Land Cracker is essentially a siege platform. It is primarily designed as a tool for orbital bombardment. It is armed with two ultra-heavy gauss cannons that can fire extremely large and dense projectiles that can literally crater entire city blocks from orbit. It is also meant to be employed as a siege machine against large and unmaneuverable threats in space such as space stations or asteroid bases."

"Is it a threat against our ships, commander?" An officer of the Eye of Ylvaine asked.

The Legion Commander nodded. "They certainly are. Even at longer ranges it can still reliably hit the hulls of most of our capital ships. Vessels such as the Vivacious Wal and the Dragon's Den won't fall apart if they are struck by a single round, but sustained bombardment by a multitude of Land Crackers will easily tear their outer hulls to pieces. Our responsibility is to stop or suppress them first. Our capital ships are the foundation of our fleet in the Red Ocean. We cannot afford to lose a single one of them. The sooner we deal with the Land Crackers, the less ships we will lose."

"Won't the Land Crackers try to do the same to us, sir? We pose a similar threat to their own fleet."

If the Larkinsons were able to understand the threat posed by the Steel Rain, the Ferrils were probably making plans to take out the artillery mechs of the Eye of Ylvaine as well!

Commander Taon acknowledged the danger they were in. "Neither of us can tolerate the existence of the other. In the early stages of the upcoming battle, it's impossible for our melee mechs to get close to the enemy fleet and vice versa. The only way to take out any artillery mech ensconced in bunkers is to blast them from a distance. With our

clan, we shall bear the greatest burden. We'll certainly be outnumbered in terms of artillery mechs but we can depend on the assistance of our other ranged mechs. Nevertheless, none of them are as good at destroying bunkers as our Transcendent Punishers. We need to identify the positions of the Land Crackers as soon as possible and take them out before they can fire too many heavy caliber rounds."

The threat posed by the Steel Rain did not end at that. The Ship Cracker was a similar heavy artillery mech model that was armed with four heavy cannons. Unlike the guns of the prior variant, the Ship Cracker's armament featured a faster firing rate and a faster muzzle velocity. A large number of Ship Crackers was able to pour a consistent rain of metal that was able to chew apart unarmored vessels with ease and whittle down better-armored vessels on a continuing basis!

Unlike the Land Cracker, the Ship Cracker's faster muzzle velocity allowed it to pose a significantly greater threat to ships at longer ranges. They were able to land their projectiles with decent hit rates under those circumstances and they only grew more accurate as the distance narrowed!

They were even able to threaten slower and relatively immobile mechs at favorable ranges!

Then there was the Mech Cracker variant. Though it featured the smallest caliber out of the Cracker line, it still carried eight medium gauss cannons! The Mech Cracker's arsenal was characterized by a high rate of fire. It could unleash a torrent of projectiles that were very fast, reasonably accurate and was able to threaten entire mech companies in the open!

"I'm told the Mech Cracker doesn't usually fire solid slugs like the other two Cracker mechs." Taon warned his cadre. "Instead, it fired special fragmentation rounds that break up in flight and spread out over a small area akin to shotgun discharges. The rounds are smart so the dwarven mech pilots can program them to split at any distance. They're not just limited to close range. Now, even with eight cannons, a single Mech Cracker isn't necessarily a great threat to our mechs. However, if hundreds of them fire in a single portion of our formation at a time, our exposed mechs will either become so suppressed that they can't do anything or get killed by a thousand cuts. The tsunami of solid fragments that the Mech Crackers can unleash is also disproportionately effective at taking out exposed modules such as flight systems and booster systems. They can outright immobilize entire swarms of lighter-armored mechs!"

Though the members of the recently-established Eye of Ylvaine had boundless faith in the Great Prophet and the Bright Martyr, hearing about the formidable firepower of the Cracker line of mechs caused many to come close to questioning their beliefs.

Of course, this doubt only lasted a brief amount of time.

A white-robed woman rose from her seat and spread her arms.

"Do not despair." Priestess Samandra Avikon said. "Some of us may die, but we shall never fail in our mission. We fight alongside gods and Larkinsons. A stronger combination doesn't exist. It does not take any foresight to know that the Eye of Ylvaine will never fail! Do you know why?"

The Ylvainans all stretched out their arms and pointed their fingers forwards!

"WE NEVER MISS!"

Chapter 3230: Planning Sessions

Of all of the mech legions, the Battle Criers were the most subdued of all. As one of the more closed and least public units of the Larkinson Army, not a lot of clansmen paid attention to them. It was hard to get into them as the Kinners who controlled this mech legion demanded an unreasonable amount of loyalty from its troops.

Though every Larkinson was loyal by definition, not many were able to readily sacrifice their own lives for the good of the clan.

The Battle Criers might not be the toughest, deadliest or most skilled soldiers, but they were definitely the most committed to Ves and his clan!

Legion Commander Hugin Cinnabar rubbed his trimmed red beard as he addressed a compartment filled with Battle Crier officers. Many of them were fellow Kinners such as himself but there were also a couple of notable exceptions.

Captain Dietrich had quietly distinguished himself among the Battle Criers. Despite his relative youth, he turned out to be a steady leader and was good at inducting new recruits in the ways of the most loyal mech legions.

The native Cloudy Curtainer and former member of Walter's Whalers had more than earned Commander Cinnabar's trust.

Right now, Dietrich raised his hand and asked the obvious question.

"Which unit are we responsible, commander?"

Commander Cinnabar crossed his arms. "That depends. We don't know the full details of the hostile dwarven force. There are bound to be a lot of high-priority threats. The reason why we label them such is because each of them can single-handedly inflict a defeat on us. Now, our other brethren in the Larkinson Army have already picked their respective targets. Each of them will be responsible for containing different threats. We shoulder a similar burden. The only difference is that we do not yet know the names of our foes or the properties of their mechs."

Another Battle Crier frowned. "Don't we have enough information on each of the mech regiments of the dwarven mech divisions? At least that much should be known to the public, right?"

"Ah, but the Ferril Provincial Army haven't publicized most of its expert pilots and expert mechs. The Vulcan Empire may be at peace at the moment but it has always prepared itself for war against its human neighbors. It makes sense to hide their trump cards such as the details of expert pilots. What we must do is to prepare to step up and block their way as much as possible if there are no better alternatives."

This was a difficult task. They were at least able to anticipate how to fight against known threats such as the Gauss Baron or the Paravad. Though it was unlikely that the remaining expert mechs of the enemy force were as strong as these heroes, it was still a huge challenge to fight against numerous unknown Ferril expert mechs!

By now, the Battle Criers mostly piloted the Bright Warrior IB, the default model of the Larkinson Clan. Although this modular mech platform was both strong and versatile, there was still a huge gulf between this regular mech model and a genuine expert mech.

Were their numbers high enough to complete this task? Nobody knew for certain.

Commander Cinnabar offered them some encouragement. "We are not alone in this. We will have support of numerous other friendlies such as the Heavensworders, the Eye of Ylvaine and more depending on the situation. The Penitent Sisters will cooperate extensively with us. Our responsibility is to block and entangle any expert mechs that try to pass through our lines. The Eternal Redemptions piloted by the Penitent Sisters will provide crucial heavy fire support from the rear. Their powerful gauss cannons can inflict a huge amount of kinetic damage per hit and is one of our best solutions to overpower the high-quality armor systems that expert mechs typically enjoy."

The heavy air in the compartment receded a bit after he spoke, but the Battle Criers still weren't sure whether their odds were good enough.

"Sir, if the dwarves deploy 15 expert mechs or more, I'm not sure we have the numbers to stop them all." Dietrich voiced his concerns. "Even if our expert mechs are able to keep half of them at bay, the rest can probably overrun us or circle around us. Our Bright Warriors aren't fast enough to stay in their way if they try their best to avoid our blockade."

This was one of the difficult aspects about fighting expert mechs. All of their parameters were so high that even their weaknesses weren't really a big deal when compared to the performance of regular mechs.

Aside from extreme cases such as the planned upgrade of the Shield of Samar, most expert mechs were able to move faster than regular mechs. Mobility granted them a lot

of initiative, allowing them to have the agency to affect an ongoing battle in any way they liked.

The Battle Crier Commander was already aware of this but did not look discouraged. Instead, he offered his men a vicious grin.

"Our clan is aware of the risks and has granted us a means to force the expert mechs to target us first. Have you heard about the recent development of the new luminar crystal rifles? General Verle has decided to allocate the largest batch of these newly-produced rifles to us. I'm told that each of them are configured to deal enhanced damage to resonance shields and resonance-based defensive measures. As long as we focus our fire on any of the enemy expert mechs, we can easily strip their most powerful defenses against conventional attacks!"

This was a huge boon to the Battle Criers! Everyone became shocked when Commander Cinnabar briefly shared the details of what the new rifles were capable of. Although the standard production model was weaker than the Amaranto's main armament, as long as they were all slotted with the same light beam attack phase crystals, they could inflict serious damage against one of cheat-like abilities that made expert mechs so difficult to defeat!

Still, as much as the Battle Criers were glad to receive the new rifles, the amount was not that much in absolute terms. After all, the clan only started producing them a few months ago and many production crews were still trying to learn the ropes of synthesizing the complicated crystals with the help that the Patriarch had provided.

"How much power do these new rifles have, sir?" Captain Dietrich asked.

"We don't know, to be honest. Our clan hasn't performed many tests with them due to safety concerns. However, it is estimated that they can inflict at least four to ten times as much damage to resonance shields than regular weapons. That means if we arm 200 Bright Warriors with these new rifles, they can potentially inflict as much damage to an expert mech as an entire mech regiment! This is a crucial opportunity to equalize the odds considering we are already outnumbered by the enemy. The less mechs it takes to occupy the dwarven expert mechs, the more we can free up other friendly mechs."

What the Larkinsons had to do was to negate the numbers disparity as much as possible! The Larkinson Army was constantly figuring out ways to counter or deal with specific dwarven units with the least amount of cost. If they didn't do so, then too many dwarven mechs would be free to surround the Larkinsons, reinforce other dwarven units and generally tip the balance in the Ferril Provincial Army's favor.

The Battle Criers had to do the same, and shouldered one of the most dangerous responsibilities. Dietrich and everyone else knew that even if these new luminar crystal rifles were able to live up to their promises, that didn't mean that the enemy expert mechs would quickly be toppled.

Every expert mech was clad with extremely high quality armor. That was especially the case with dwarven mechs as they were bulkier and stockier than their regular humanoid counterparts!

Another factor that limited the effectiveness of the new weapon system was that the Battle Criers actually had to hit their targets. This was quite difficult to achieve against faster and more agile expert mechs. Their high mobility characteristics along with their extraordinary mech pilots easily allowed them to be very proficient at evading attacks.

As the Battle Criers discussed how to handle highly mobile targets, elsewhere other groups of Larkinson soldiers were trying to figure out a way to contribute to the defense of their clan.

"Our job is simple, men." Commander Casella Ingvar addressed the Living Sentinels. "We hold the line. That is all. We are not meant to maneuver a lot. From the beginning, our job is to stick close to our ships and prevent the enemy from getting close enough to threaten our vulnerable ships and people. We aren't the stars of the show, so we cannot single-handedly stop any of the hostile dwarves. However, we do not have to defeat any enemy alone. Whether it is the Gatecrasher, the Paravad or any other powerful dwarven mech, there will be elites to take them down. Our job is to stall, block or distract any opponent who gets close enough to our fleet. Is that understood?"

"Yes, commander!"

"Who are we?!"

"We are the watchers clad in silver!"

The Avatars, the Penitent Sisters, the Swordmaidens and so on all held similar sessions. The cloud of uncertainty that hung over the clouds of the soldiers evaporated when they received concrete instructions on what to do in the coming battle.

Everyone gained their own purpose. Some were tasked with preventing the Molten Hammers from punching through the lines of the Golden Skull Alliance. Others were expected to skirmish against the mobile assets of the Hivar Roarers. Some were even expected to fight against specific mechs.

Venerable Stark stared at the projection of the three most prominent enemy expert mechs.

She and the other expert pilots of the Larkinson Clan were all contemplating their own priorities in the upcoming battle.

Of the six expert pilots, two of them looked distinctly upset.

Though Venerable Joshua and Venerable Jannzi did not see eye-to-eye with each other very often, this time they shared the same sentiment.

"If only I had an expert mech..." Joshua whined.

Venerable Jannzi tapped her foot in frustration. "I'm not happy with this either, but there is nothing we can do. We can still contribute to the battle in our own ways. Your Valkyrie Prime and my Shield of Samar are still far more powerful than any regular mech."

"It's not the same! I wouldn't dare fight against a real expert mech!"

"There are still ways to fight them." Jannzi said. "You just need to cooperate with other friendlies. That's what we did in the Battle of Reckoning. I don't see why we can't employ this solution again."

It wasn't the same. As long as an expert mech was really serious about defeating their prime mechs, Joshua and Jannzi would definitely be pushed to their limits. If not for the fact that their prime mechs were clad with a copious amount of Unending alloy, their prime mechs might not even be able to withstand a single powerful resonance attack!

Compared to this unfortunate pair, the other expert pilots were a lot more upbeat.

Each of them were highly confident about their own chances. Their expert mechs were far more powerful than typical ones. They not only incorporated powerful resonance materials, but also enjoyed numerous unique advantages that allowed them to stand out further.

However, aside from Venerable Stark, the other three Larkinsons expert pilots were aware that they suffered from a major shortcoming.

"Our expert mechs are strong, but I'm not sure whether we can keep up." Venerable Tusa stated the obvious. He exchanged glances with both Venerable Orfan and Venerable Dise. "We might be impressive in the eyes of other mech pilots, but among expert pilots we are still too young and weak. Our resonance strengths measure in the single digits and we don't have much real battle experience with our expert mechs."

Venerable Orfan grew impatient. "What are you trying to say, Tusa?"

"We ought to be fighting against their expert pilots that more closely match our strength. However, since our side is short on expert mechs, we have no choice but to fight against their more powerful ones. Let's consider the other two prominent enemy expert mechs. Can any of us fight against the Gauss Baron or the Paravad by ourselves?"

The other expert pilots weren't able to supply an immediate answer.