

## Mech 3321

### *Chapter 3321: Fast Shipping*

Ves continued to spend much of his days making statue after statue. He stopped experimenting with Vulcan and the Hammer of Brilliance once he figured out their basic parameters.

The Analysis Record and False Inspiration abilities formed the bread and butter of Vulcan's productive capabilities. Ves was sure his incarnation could do more, but the current circumstances were not right. It appeared that he had to expose Vulcan to different situations in order to draw out his other capabilities.

"It's fine."

Neither of the two known abilities provided much use to Ves at the moment. The statues he was making were so simple that he only needed to employ the Analysis Record a few times to understand most of the nuances he needed to take into account to maintain a consistently high standard of quality.

The gap between good and masterwork could not be solved by following a checklist or formula. Ves still needed to rely on his own skill, judgement, intuition and luck to create a work that surpassed the physical limitations of a design.

"Miracles aren't called that way when they can be mass produced." Ves depreciatingly observed.

Aside from relying on occasional flukes, the few times where he was able to put himself in a false inspired state enabled him to figure out new insights that he had previously missed.

Ves predicted that if he continued hitting himself in the head every four days or so while he constantly produced the same item, he could eventually master its creation to such an extent that he could pump out masterworks on a reliable basis!

"The only problem is that I have to hit myself in the head way too many times for that to happen!"

Based on the current pattern, Ves estimated he needed to put himself in a false inspired state at least a dozen times before he figured out how to control for every variable.

Was it worth it to do so for a single version of his Vulcan statue? Not to him. He also had to do the same for the other version of Vulcan's depictions, though the similarities between the two undoubtedly allowed him to borrow many of his previous gains.

"The issue here is that it takes a lot more whacks for me to do the same for my mechs!"

A metal statue he could hold in his hand was much less daunting than a fully functional statue that could tower over him! The amount of variables that Ves had to take into account multiplied by at least a million times and that was only for the simpler products. The more complex ones

such as expert mechs were even more finicky and complicated to fabricate!

Of course, many of these variables and parameters weren't unique. In practice, mech designers and other technical professionals were able to condense them into a smaller number of groups or categories where a standard solution or formula was enough to account for most of the details.

"That doesn't make it much better, though."

Given that each false inspired state provided him with a relatively limited amount of insights per session, Ves would probably have to bonk his head with his hammer at least a thousand times before he fully mastered a design like the Bright Warrior!

This would turn into a long-term process that could stretch on for years before Ves attained his ultimate reward.

"Well, at least I will constantly see improvements over time. It's not like I have to wait until the end to notice the difference."

Ves didn't see much point in employing this ability unless he had a mass production mech model that held its value over the long term. As soon as he updated its design, so many parameters would change that he would have to start over at least part of the way.

In that regard, the False Inspiration that the Hammer of Brilliance was able to bestow was more useful as a learning tool.

Ves focussed less on Vulcan as he continued to make batches and batches of statues. He only stopped once he made 1000 copies of each of the two versions.

"Now that I've made them, I need to put them in the hands of the dwarves."

Doing that was fairly challenging, but the trade between the Vulcan Empire and the rest of the Fermi Star Cluster had never dried up. Even with the recent tensions, greedy trading companies found several ways to circumvent the blockade on foreign traffic.

Ves had already instructed Minister Shederin to prepare a solution. The foreign minister did not spend his time in vain and contracted numerous courier companies on both the human and dwarven side of the border to ship the 'specialty products' to numerous prominent destinations in the Vulcan Empire!

"Are you sure the goods won't end up stolen or confiscated?" He asked.

"We're not engaging in smuggling, sir. Not technically." The old man calmly replied. "As long as the handover takes place in the border region, it is unlikely that the nearby patrols will step in. The Lost and the Vulcanites pay much more attention to the people moving through their territories. As for goods, simple inspections can easily warn them if there is anything wrong."

That was a slight complication because the glows around the statues were quite noticeable at close range. Ves had to invent a simple spiritual mechanism where the glows of the statues remained inactive until they were taken out of their packaging.

Once the recipients took his gifts out of their boxes, the statues would bloom to life and create an unforgettable first impression!

Ves briefly checked the date. "I need to see quick results. We've been delaying our main journey long enough."

"I have contracted the fastest courier shipping companies that are willing to enter into business with us. I've even set up shell companies and acted under a different identity in order to gain the cooperation of dwarven companies. By the way, I have also signed a contract with the Persham Chamber of Commerce. The Pershams are honored to ship our goods to the Paramount Province."

"The Pershams?"

"Yes, the third-class dwarven traders we've met during our initial foray into the Vulcan Empire."

Ves hadn't heard that name in a while. He still remembered the friendly dwarves that he exchanged with. If the crazier Vulcans didn't launch an attack on the expeditionary fleet, maybe he would have been able to forge a better bond with Director Olivier Persham!

Unfortunately, history didn't progress this way. Ves had no stomach to befriend any Vulcanites after the Battle of Fordilla Zentra. Though he still thought the Pershams were okay people, they might not like him anymore if they learned what he was attempting to do with the cargo they were commissioned to transport.

Ves sighed. "You don't have to treat them differently. The next time we enter the Vulcan Empire, we won't need their guidance anymore."

Well, those were certainly ominous words. As someone who helped Ves flesh out his devious plan, Shederin was aware that this was not an empty boast.

"Well, regardless of who we've entered business with, you should be able to see the first results in little over a week. Since our cargo takes up relatively little space, we can

put them in the cargo holds of the fastest courier vessels that are especially employed to transport small, high-value parcels from one region to another. The transportation infrastructure of the Vulcan Empire is still working normally with relatively few disruptions."

Courier vessels designed for speed and reach instead of cargo capacity could cover much more distance than other starships. On a proportional basis, their FTL drives and propulsion systems were much larger than bigger ships such as combat carriers.

Some were so extreme that it was not wrong to describe them as FTL drives wrapped in a metal shell!

Even though these corvette-sized vessels were small, they were not exactly cheap. The operational costs were high relative to the small amount of cargo capacity they possessed, so the transportation fees could easily be hundreds or thousands of times higher than regulation transportation!

There was plenty of demand for their services, though. Whether it was a CEO who urgently needed to travel to a distant company branch or a biolab transferring time-sensitive experimental materials to another lab, there were plenty of people and companies who were willing to pay the equivalent of millions of hex credits just to get a package delivered a week sooner.

"Do you intend to ship out additional goods to the Vulcan Empire?" Shederin asked.

Ves shook his head. "No. I've already made enough. I'm already sick and tired of the statues I've made. Even if I employed a bit of automation to speed up production, I can't keep making the same simple products over and over again."

Perhaps he might hold a different opinion if he was stuck making mechs, but that was not the case at the moment.

After making sure that the statues he made would ship towards their respective destinations, Ves temporarily put this issue aside. What happened next did not require any more actions on his part. He just needed to wait and enjoy the results.

Ves decided to allocate all of his available time on completing his remaining expert mech design projects.

Now that he wasn't distracted by his side projects anymore, he was able to make more refinements to the designs. It was a pity that the Hammer of Brilliance wasn't particularly useful in the design phase of a project.

Ves tried experimenting with it by whacking it on the heads of different people. For some reason, no one appreciated receiving a tap from his glowing hammer.

"Can you please put that thing away? I'm afraid it will cave in my skull!" An assistant mech designer begged.

"Don't worry. I have excellent control over my strength. I know exactly how much force is needed to break through a skull and I'll make sure my tap is well below that threshold!"

"..."

Using the Hammer on other mech designers achieved negligible results. Aside from not being assigned to any hands-on production work, inspired states simply didn't provide as much benefits to them because of their limited knowledge and experience.

One day, Ves decided to try it out on Ketis. He nonchalantly walked up to her workstation and lifted his hammer above her head while she was engrossed in fine-tuning the swordfighting capabilities of the Chimera Project.

As soon as his hammer came close to bonking his student on the head, Ketis' Bloodsinger suddenly surged forth and parried the attempted strike!

"Nice try, Ves, but I could feel you coming a long time ago." The woman smirked as she swiveled around her chair. "Here's a tip for you. Never sneak up to a trained soldier. Others could have responded a lot more violently."

Ves awkwardly coughed. "It's not an attack, Ketis. I was just trying to help you out. You've seen me hitting other people with this hammer before, haven't you? They all gained something out of the experience."

She still looked skeptical. She didn't look particularly impressed at the hammer either. It was too clumsy to function as a proper weapon and it was too large and unwieldy to serve as a primitive work tool.

"Just give me a chane. I just want to see what happens."

"...Fine. Don't hit me over the head, though. Give me the hammer and I'll do it myself."

Ketis was the first person who made this request. Now that Ves thought about it, he never attempted to see what happened if others used the Hammer of Brilliance.

"Here you go."

Once Ketis received the artifact, she attempted to resonate with it. This didn't go too well as the hammer was not a sword.

She even commanded Sharpie to leave Bloodsinger and see whether it could enter the Hammer of Brilliance.

It turned out that he couldn't.

Swish swish.

"It was worth a try." She shrugged.

She gently lifted the implement and carefully controlled her strength so that she could hit herself with the lightest of taps.

Her head began to glow bronze, but nothing else happened.

"Vulcan says you need to lower your mental defenses. He can't get in." Ves relayed.

"That's easier said than done, Ves. I don't normally like to make myself vulnerable."

"Just do your best."

It took a bit of time, but Vulcan was finally able to exert his influence on Ketis.

"So... do you feel anything different?" Ves said after a while.

"I don't think so. When I look back at my work, I think about the same things as before. I haven't gained any new ideas or anything."

"What?"

Ves became confused.

*Chapter 3322: Grand Regent Habidas Aaden*

A crisis raged in the Vulcan Empire. After the Ferril Provincial Army tried and failed to defeat a visiting human fleet that had obtained official sanction from the MTA, many dwarves were appalled at the consequences!

The unprovoked attack would have led to an upheaval in Vulcanite space regardless of victory or loss, but the way it turned out failed to build up momentum for the Dwarven God Cult!

This left the two major religious factions of the Vulcan people in an awkward position. The Dwarven God Cult had slowly achieved consistent gains over the last decade and was about to overtake the traditional Vulcan Faith sooner or later.

A victory against a notable human fleet should have proved to every Vulcanite that dwarvenkind was superior to the tall folk and that it was their destiny to overtake the galaxy!

"Today, we take over the Fermi Star Cluster. Tomorrow, we'll sweep across the entire galactic rim!"

Those expectations were way overblown in hindsight. It turned out that dwarven technology wasn't superior to human technology and that dwarven skill could not single handedly accomplish victory. A lot of radical and influential Dwarven God cultists had egg on their face.

What was worse for the Vulcanites was that they had already released the arrow from their bow. They could not take back their egregious attack that affected the lives of not just the radicals, but also the traditionalists who never asked to restart their struggle against the tall folk in the first place!

"Do you know what you have just done? The humans will crush us all for what we have done!"

"You fools! War isn't a game! For every glorious battle, there are ten awful tragedies. The dwarven bodies that will stack up as a result of your mistakes will form a monument of your folly!"

Tensions between different groups of Vulcanites intensified. Radicals against traditionalists. The younger generation against the older generation. Militarists against pacifists. Second-raters against third-raters. Every division became more polarized and consensus was nowhere to be seen.

The adherents of the traditional Vulcan Faith who still clung to the stuffy belief of a human Vulcan had gained enough wind in their sails to form a proper resistance against the radical Dwarven God cultists!

In the weeks that passed since the battle, this had led to numerous reversals. Far from providing greater momentum to the Dwarven God Cult, the disastrous engagement stopped their progress entirely, forcing them to clash more openly against the old fogeys who they long accused of holding back dwarvenkind.

What was even worse was that the Vulcan Empire stood to lose their hidden guarantee of independence from the MTA.

The proof that the Vulcan Empire ignored the MTA's own rules was indisputable. This was not a minor slip-up such as implementing unsafe neural interfaces into mechs but a direct attack against third parties that had been offered safe passage!

It did not matter if the attack was launched by a rogue faction or a fringe group within the Vulcan Empire. The consequences of this action affected the entire dwarven state, which was exactly what the attackers set out to accomplish!



Grand Regent Habidas Aaden, the leader of the Vulcan Empire, was beset with the gravest crisis of his life.

A part of him already acknowledged that the Dwarven God Cult would become the new truth to the citizens of the Vulcan Empire. Even if he didn't like the shift, there was little he could do to prevent this popular strain from attracting more believers.

Yet the self-destructive attack its adherents had launched against a human fleet showed that the Dwarven God cultists weren't qualified to rule the Vulcan Empire!

"What do they know of responsibility? They will burn our dwarven state if they keep provoking the tall folks!"

Many other Vulcanites of the old guard formed the same conclusion as well. Before, they just thought that the extreme statements of the Dwarven God Cult was mere hyperbole. As long as their jingoistic behavior was confined to boasting, there was little harm in letting them talk.

Yet now that they had actually taken action, a lot of traditionalists and those on the fence became abhorred at the direction the Dwarven God cultists wanted to take the Vulcan Empire.

It was fine if the crazies in their state wanted to board a starship and commit suicide by flying straight into a star.

The problem was that the starship accommodated other passengers as well! Many Vulcanites who remembered the rebellion or grew up hearing stories about it from their parents and teachers did not want to get implicated by the actions of their fellow dwarves!

The Grand Regent had to confront two major challenges.

The first was to help the Vulcan Faith push back against the Dwarven God Cult and inject some much-needed sanity in their great state!

The second was to convince the Mech Trade Association not to revoke its guarantee of protection.

Grand Regent Aaden personally presided over the official meetings with the representatives of the MTA. Though the powerful human organization had yet to make a final decision, the unofficial tribunal that happened behind closed doors was not going well for the dwarves.

The Association did not let the Vulcanites rely on the excuse that the unprovoked attack had been launched by a single rogue group that did not represent the greater will of the Vulcan Empire.



"These are not terrorists, Mr. Aaden." An imperious and officious-looking woman declared as she sat on the other side of the long table. "The Ferril Provincial Army is an official military institution of your state. Your lack of control of your attack dogs does not absolve your state from responsibility. The severity of your crime is even greater once I bring up the fact that Patriarch Ves Larkinson is a 10th tier galactic citizen and a contributor of restricted technology. From our own investigations, these factors did not deter your men from attacking his fleet. On the contrary, your soldiers sounded eager to defeat an affiliate of our Association. What do you have to say for yourself, grand regent?"

The middle-aged dwarf whose majestic blond beard was bedecked with exotic jewelry looked discomfited. There was no way for him to hide his difficulties.

Habidas Aaden did not believe the MTA had been unaware that elements of his own state were plotting to attack the human fleet. With the power the mechers possessed, they could have easily employed a hundred different solutions to prevent the attack from happening in the first place!

Given these circumstances, why did the MTA refuse to step in and prevent the worst from happening?

It was unfortunate that it was not wise for the dwarven leader to voice this question out loud. The motives of the MTA were unfathomable and Aaden was quite aware that the massive trans-galactic organization was divided into many factions. Who knew which one was in charge in this region at the moment.

"We are more than willing to compensate the Golden Skull Alliance for all of the losses they have suffered, financial or otherwise." The grand regent spoke in a modest voice. "We are also prepared to pay a penalty fee to your Association on behalf of the extremists who have attempted to plunge trillions of innocent dwarven civilians into the abyss."

The stern-faced human woman shook her head and tapped her finger against the table. The surface caved in as the fingernail dug straight through the hard wood material as if it was butter!

"The act committed by your state is too severe to be made up with an ordinary fine. Actions have consequences, Mr. Aaden. Our Association has a reputation to uphold."

With the way these talks were going, the grand regent could already foresee the MTA revoking its support for the Vulcan Empire.

The Vulcan Empire and the MTA had long maintained an implicit understanding. The dwarves were allowed to keep an entire star sector to themselves in exchange for serving as proof that the Association was tolerant and supportive towards minorities.

Even if the Vulcanites were not that pleasant in reality, the secret agreement was beneficial to the MTA's goal of maintaining their legitimacy as the guardian and hegemon of human civilization.

However, now that the Vulcan Empire's extremism became more prominent, it became a lot less appealing to provide support for its toxic people!

What the Grand Regent had been trying to do all this time was to convince the MTA's representative that the Vulcanites still possessed redeeming traits. As long as the Vulcan Faith was able to take advantage of the Dwarven God Cult's embarrassment, the traditional and more conservative dwarves might be able to take back much of the gains made by the radicals!

The only job the grand regent and his team of diplomats needed to do was to buy time. As long as the MTA had yet to issue its verdict, there was still a chance the Vulcan Empire could return to normal!

In fact, the current crisis also caused many officials aligned with the Dwarven God Cult to waver. While their belief in Vulcan as a dwarf was still absolute, that did not necessarily mean they had to support all of the stances of the cult leaders!

Flame Herald Uven Yellowshoe was known as a firebrand, much like his father who had laid the seeds of the cult's meteoric rise.

Yet as one of the most powerful and influential dwarves of the Vulcan Empire, the burden of responsibility weighed heavily on him as well.

"Perhaps... we should not launch a war against the tall folk so soon."

He had never doubted his cause and beliefs more at any point in his life than now! Though he frequently exhorted his flock to rid themselves of their fear against the tall folk, pushing the Vulcan Empire into a very real war against the tall folk at its current level of strength might not be as optimistic as he thought.

As he rewatched the footage of the Battle of Fordilla Zentra over and over again, he realized that the tall folk were not as feeble in battle as he thought.

"Their evil gods are too powerful!" He privately exclaimed. "Vulcan is the most powerful god in the galaxy, but... is he strong enough to resist all of the human gods at once?"

This was a blasphemous question, yet the footage provided clear proof that Vulcan's blessing could not grant his chosen the victory they deserved.

As the highest authority of the Dwarven God Cult actually began to doubt the strength of the master he served with all of his devotion, one of his assistants urgently requested to enter his office!

"What is the matter, Deacon Ezek?"

"Vulcan has blessed us with his great craft!" The older dwarf in priestly robes shouted as he walked up to the Flame Herald's desk. "Two days ago, one of our local temples received a curious parcel from an unknown sender. When they opened it up, they encountered an artifact that had enlightened them to Vulcan's truth!"

The deacon did not spend much time explaining what happened afterwards. As more and more devout Dwarven God cultists encountered Vulcan's gift, their convictions had all grown stronger. The incident attracted so much attention that Deacon Ezek eventually decided that the head of the cult needed to know about this miracle!

A short time later, a humble but ecstatic-looking dwarf brought forth a small metal statue of their god.

As soon as its glow enveloped Uven Yellowshoe, the leader of the Dwarven God Cult closed his eyes.

Thirty seconds passed before they opened up again. This time, the Flame Herald exhibited no more doubt!

"I see now. The truth has always been in front of me. Dwarvenkind is truly superior! Though our numbers are less and our territory is paltry, our people will always find a way! A single defeat does not determine that we are weak. As long as our cause is just, victory shall be ours! For Vulcan!"

"For Vulcan!"

#### *Chapter 3323: The Ultimate Truth*

Over the course of several weeks, many notable and influential Vulcanites received mysterious parcels.

Word began to spread of the divine gifts contained within the untraceable packages. The first couple of recipients had already spoken of the blessings that they received!

In fact, their claims sounded so exaggerated that most Vulcanites initially dismissed the news as idle rumors.

More people started to receive the parcels, though. When they or a member of their staff all opened them up, they instantly became enlightened by Vulcan's glory!

The dwarves had never experienced Vulcan's presence in such a direct and wondrous manner. It was especially amazing considering that every form of scanning and examination revealed that the statues were merely solid blocks of normal metal!

"Only Vulcan can bless these statues with his divinity!"

"Our god has answered our calls in our darkest hour! Our deliverance is at hand!"

From generals to priests, those who held sway and those who commanded the attention of the dwarven people all obtained a much-coveted parcel with no return address.

Word of mouth continued to explode throughout the Vulcan Empire. While there were minority of cautious dwarves who got spooked by the statues and had them destroyed, there were still well over 1900 statues that had each obtained a place of honor among their new owners!

Many different Vulcanites reacted differently to these divine objects. The presence they exuded specifically appealed to their beliefs in a way that was more direct and personal than anything they experienced!

The glow they exuded were not that strong compared to the mechs that Ves had designed. The glow also didn't actually compel the dwarves to do anything. All it did was to project the presence of a human or dwarven version of Vulcan depending on the specific statue. It did nothing else, and that was a deliberate choice.

When Ves revealed his plan to Shederin and Calabast, the two advisors sternly warned him that he could easily cross a line and get on the bad side of the MTA.

This was why he made sure to minimize his criminal liability. Perhaps the Vulcan Empire had to spend a lot of effort to trace where the parcels came from, but he was not stupid enough to assume the MTA was also clueless!

Fortunately, Ves had interacted with the MTA enough times to roughly know what he could get away with. If Ves wanted to avoid an unwelcome visit from one of their representatives, he had to possess enough plausible deniability.

This was why he refrained from inserting any specific values or emotions when he made his statues. He simply portrayed Vulcan in the most authentic manner possible.

According to Minister Shederin, this was more than enough to achieve the desired effect.

"The Vulcanites are deeply flawed, more so than other humans." The old man explained one day. "Many human states are more mature and better run because their citizens benefit from an enormous accumulation of societal development. From antiquity onwards, numerous advancements such as the abolition of slavery to the prohibition of the current taboos have all contributed to the common prosperity of many states."

"What makes the Vulcan Empire different, then?" Ves curiously asked.

"The dwarven state is not as connected to human civilization as other states. It is more insular than usual as its citizens explicitly reject the galactic consensus. They believe it is too human-centric, you see. While this has allowed the Vulcanites to build up their own pride and confidence in their culture, it has also produced severe flaws that have made them vulnerable to threats that would otherwise not work."

"Like what?"

"Let me describe the Vulcan Empire's ailments in a manner that a mech designer like you should be able to comprehend. Think of a normal state like the Bright Warrior. It is a decent, modern and competitive state that is not excellent at anything but is stable, reliable and open."

Ves twitched his mouth when he heard that description. Even a diplomat didn't hold the highest opinion of one of his works.

"Compared to a normal state, the Vulcan Empire is akin to a second-class mech that is two generations older than the Bright Warrior model. Maybe this other mech appears stronger to many people because it is more expensive and incorporates better materials, but its shortcomings cannot be denied. As long as a competent opponent can recognize one of these vulnerabilities, it takes less effort to defeat it than it should."

Ves understood the analogy. The Vulcan Empire might look strong and powerful compared to its regional rivals, but its dwarven citizens were too insular and biased. This caused their cultural and institutional development to fall behind in many different aspects, which meant the dwarven state was vulnerable to an attack that targeted its weak points!

It was clear to Ves and Shederin that religion was one of its major weaknesses. While there were many states where different religions were dominant, those that withstood the test of time always tempered their extremism to a degree. At the very least, they needed to recognize that the rest of the galaxy didn't always welcome their faith and that their forceful attempts at convincing others that they were spreading the truth might not be appreciated by their audience.

This was a lesson that even the Hexer people had learned!

Seeing that Ves understood his point, Minister Shederin wrapped up his explanation.

"The Vulcanites are too flawed and their society is too young. The rapid growth of their empire has caused them to become ignorant of their own flaws. After all, they only look at their own success and fail to see the dangers that they have yet to address. This is a rather common problem to many insular states. Always remember that a state or organization is strongest when it remains in touch with the rest of human society."

Ves had the sense that Shederin was not just talking about the Vulcan Empire when he spoke those words.

In any case, Ves sent out so many different statues that at least some of them should be able to yield the desired results.

He simply kept working on his mech design projects while keeping a close eye on the regional news.

He felt more and more gratified when the dwarven news portals started to praise his work. Though the mass-produced totems were relatively trivial objects, Ves was still a creator and he always gained satisfaction when his customers enjoyed his work.

Of course, he became extra satisfied this time because his customers happened to be Vulcanites this time!

"Hehehehe..." Ves deviously grinned as he kept reading the headlines related to his work. "Keep embracing my totems. Vulcan is truly on your side... just not your side. Hehehehe..."

Many dwarves who became exposed to the statues felt as if their questions had been answered and that their doubts had been resolved.

"Vulcan is a dwarven god!" A leader of the Dwarven God Cult exclaimed as he lifted up the statue of a dwarf! "The grand regent, the high priestess and their lackeys have been wrong all of this time! No. Their crimes are worse. They and their predecessors have covered up the truth all of this time. They knew that Vulcan was a dwarf but deliberately lied about it to deprive us of Vulcan's favor. The grand regent and his cabal of cowards and parasites are all liars! Tear them down and restore the truth!"

"Restore the truth!" A large audience responded.

"For the dwarven god!"

"For the dwarven god!"

Many scenes such as this took place throughout the Vulcan Empire. The priests and the most devout Vulcanites all gained certainty in their beliefs. Each of them felt more connected to their god than ever and thought that their rivals and opponents were unquestionably wrong!

It wasn't just the Dwarven God cultists that had become more righteous and fanatical about their cause.

The older Vulcan Faith that had failed to keep up with the times and risked losing relevance suddenly underwent a revival.

The statues of the human god that ended up in the hands of various priests and respected leaders were no less effective in reinforcing their beliefs.

Many of them felt as if they had been right all along. The cult that had managed to sway the younger generations was not just wrong, but outright heretical for claiming that Vulcan was a dwarven god!

"Our ancestors and heroes were right all along." A provincial governor concluded as her eyes fervently stared at the simple human statue. "We have been too remiss in allowing the Dwarven God Cult to deceive our citizens and distort Vulcan's image. Even though we all want him to be a fellow dwarf, the truth must never be allowed to disappear!"

Under the influence of the statues, people such as this provincial governor did not just embrace their new certainty.

They wanted to make sure that everyone else embraced their revelation as well!

"Let me issue a new decree. From tomorrow onwards, the Dwarven God Cult must cease to exist! The cult and its followers are no longer allowed to spread their false claims and ideologies within our borders. Our administration shall mobilize all of our policing and peacekeeping forces to enforce our new rules!"

"Sir! You can't issue such a drastic decree. You're overreaching your authority and I doubt our lawmakers will agree to pass a corresponding emergency directive. Even if we implement your new decree, over thirty percent of our population has already defected to the Dwarven God Cult. Many of them will not convert back to the Vulcan Faith and will resist fiercely against any enforcement attempts!"

"The truth cannot be denied! Schedule an emergency meeting with our senators. Make sure they come in person. They must witness Vulcan's glory up close in order to be enlightened to the truth..."

With scenes like this happening in many different provinces, it did not take long before the first incidents of open violence broke out throughout the state.

"These cultists have gone too far!" A leader exclaimed as a mob of angry dwarves tried to invade the governor's mansion. "This is no longer a protest. This is an act of rebellion!"

When the mob started to employ heavy weapons against the riot police, the latter received orders to respond as fiercely as possible.

Gunfire and screams rang throughout the air as the well-armed peacekeeping forces tried to disperse and punish the deluded cultists in the clearest manner possible.

To each of them, Vulcan was a human god, and it was blasphemy to claim otherwise. These ignorant cultists needed to learn that righteousness was not on their side!

Of course, the opposition was not deterred by the government's response.



Elsewhere in the provincial capital, an influential priest of the Dwarven God Cult prayed in front of the statue of the dwarven god. The totem's divine glow caused the priest to feel no guilt or loss at the suffering of his followers.

Instead, the priest became more convinced that the corrupt officials were trying to maintain a falsehood so that they could keep exercising their power without having to answer to their god!

"If the governor thinks that he can suppress the truth and prevent Vulcan's rise, then he is sorely mistaken." The priest gritted his teeth as he turned to his followers. "Call your men and get ready for battle. If our words cannot convince the corrupt politicians to recant their lies, then we shall force the truth down their throats with our guns and mechs! To arms, my brothers!"

"For Vulcan!"

When one side began to resort to mechs, the other side quickly followed. Even though most battles ended one-sidedly due to regional differences in strength, a line had been crossed once the Vulcaintes employed their weapons against their citizens.

"Take down the corrupt leeches!"

"Suppress the deluded rebels!"

Though the bloodshed only affected a few hundred hotspots, the rest of the Vulcan Empire began to destabilize at a rapid tempo. Even the star systems dominated by one faction or another began to gear up for war. It became increasingly harder for the remaining dwarves to stay neutral!

The schism between the two factions grew more violent with each passing day!

#### *Chapter 3324: Blind Old Men*

When the more fanatical citizens of the Vulcan Empire began to clash against those they perceived to be their opponents, the public order in many parts of the state began to deteriorate.

On some planets, the conflict was limited to groups of protesters yelling curses at each other.

On other planets, the militants among the two factions had taken up arms!

When the rivalry descended into violent actions, the fighting rarely stopped at the level of infantry combat.

"Damn these heretics! They've deployed way too many goons with guns! If that's how they're going to play the game, then let's bring in a couple of mechs and see how those peacekeepers like it when we've got the bigger guns for once!"

"The rebels have escalated their insurrection. We can still control them when they gather in mobs, but we cannot protect the people if they begin to deploy mechs. Mobilize our riot mechs and stop the rebels from destroying our city!"

Of course, with each response, the scale of the fighting hadn't dropped. Instead, it kept growing larger and more intense.

On some planets, even military units had taken action!

There were many mech regiments and mech divisions that were largely composed of believers in one faith or another. The servicemen who aligned themselves to the Dwarven God Cult were much more fanatical and much less hesitant to break their neutrality and side with their fellow compatriots on the streets!

"Our time has come!" Venerable Merek Bulfuron shouted in front of an unauthorized parade of Hivar Roarers. "Ever since we returned home in defeat, the generals stripped our honors and threw us in this remote field base. They thought to push our heads down and force us to recant our faith. I say no longer! Vulcan is a dwarven god and he has returned to reveal the truth to us all! The lies espoused by the conspirators at the top have been exposed, but still our corrupt rulers usurp the authority that rightfully belongs to our god. Is this justice?!"

"NO!"

Venerable Merek sneered as he rubbed his thick fingers against his smooth and broad chin. "Our heretical commanding officers are afraid of us. Why else did they force us all to shave our beards? They can take away our hair, but they cannot deny our righteous cause! Fellow brothers, answer my call and take your mechs to the capital where we must fight to save the Vulcan Empire from the deception that has brought us further away from Vulcan's light. Let us barge our way into the governor's mansion and pull out the beards of everyone who is inside! Let's see how they like it when they lose their badge of honor! For the empire!"

"FOR THE EMPIRE!"

"For Vulcan!"

"FOR VULCAN!"

With military units rebelling or taking action on their own accord, the dwarven state truly began to slide into civil war. Open conflict erupted on the surface of more and more

planets as an increasing number of Vulcanites got caught up in the rising polarization between the two factions.

It became increasingly harder for ordinary people to remain on the sidelines, not when their leaders and role models called them into action!

"Vulcan does not forgive those who remain silent. Show your devotion now or risk eternal damnation!"

"If you do not donate to our charitable fund, you're a heretic and a traitor! A simple donation of 1000 hammers is enough to absolve you of your sins. Donate now and support our freedom fighters on the front. Withhold your funds and be prepared to answer for your inaction!"

Of course, not every citizen of the Vulcan Empire fell under the sway of sectarian strife.

There were plenty of dwarves who lived in quiet, rural planets who largely missed out on the struggle.

There were also dwarves who were not as religious as others and did not get fooled by the conflict triggered by the strange statues.

In one quiet mansion, General Iker Kebrinore slowly walked into a peaceful garden. Several bots neatly trimmed the bushes and other plants while a trio of dogs ran around while chasing each other's tails.

The disgraced general approached a dwarf who was sitting on a simple wooden chair built with dwarven proportions in mind.

"Orthox." Kebrinore greeted with a respectful nod. "I can't get used to seeing you without your beard."

The high-tier expert pilot directed his gaze away from his dogs and rubbed his smooth-shaven chin. "I do not mind my new look, to be honest. It's easier to lift my head these days. Our beards have weighed us down for so many decades that we have been looking in the wrong direction all this time."

The old general whose chin was also hairless responded with a grim smile. "I am glad to see you taking your suspension in good grace."

"I wouldn't call it that, sir. I am merely embracing the reality that I have grown too old to change anything. We are fossils, general."

The expert pilot exuded a somber and listless vibe. He had not lost against Patriarch Reginald Cross, but he had failed to protect his fellow dwarven soldiers. The deaths of all of his comrades still weighed heavily on shoulders.

The general slowly sat down on another nearby wooden chair. "Maybe you're right, but I like to assume that the Vulcan Empire still needs our services."

"The people don't want to see us again." Venerable Orthox remarked.

"The people are in confusion and it is all because of our enemy."

The expert pilot looked up to his friend and superior. "What are you talking about, Kebrinore?"

"Let me show you, Orthnox."

With a wave of his hand, a bot flew over and deposited two different statues onto a nearby table.

Both of them were clearly made in the likeness of Vulcan. The difference was that one statue interpreted Vulcan as a human while the other depicted him as a dwarf!

As soon as the two statues came close, Venerable Orthox already felt the familiar sensations. His eyes sparked as he straightened his short but powerful back.

"This sensation!"

He recognized the vibe exuded by the two metal idols!

The dwarven expert pilot grabbed the human statue and tried to compare the sensation he felt to those he experienced during his last battle.

"It's the same. It's exactly the same. The auras these statues possess are identical to the so-called 'glows' of those Larkinson mechs!"

General Kebrinore grimly nodded. "While I have not had the pleasure of experiencing the glows of our opponents, I have already asked many of our fellow Molten Hammer mech pilots whether they recognize the effect of these statuettes. Their answers concur with yours. Every soldier who has fought against the Larkinson Clan up close is able to recognize our enemy's signature tech in these deceptively simple objects."

The alarmed expert pilot began to think back on the news of the last few days. Statues identical to the two brought by General Kebrinore had suspiciously ended up in the hands of many agitators who promptly gained 'divine inspiration' from gifts that they believed came from Vulcan himself!

Yet those who remained skeptical of Vulcan regardless of his form saw more from this sequence of events.

If the statues were all made by a certain human clan leader who had good reason to hate the Vulcanites, then this was likely part of a dangerous conspiracy!

"It's a trap." Venerable Orthox gasped as his protective will came back to life. "Our empire is under attack by outside human forces, but hardly any dwarf realizes we're being fooled!"

"Do you see why I have come to you today? Disgraced or not, we cannot stand by and allow Patriarch Larkinson to cleave our state in half. The sabotage he perpetrated on our society must be dismantled, and the first step to doing that is to expose his conspiracy!"

"What do you want us to do, sir?"

"Come with me and convince our brothers to recognize that we are all being played."

General Kebrinore and Venerable Orthox left the mansion and sought out the soldiers that had already taken up arms.

When they finally managed to meet with Venerable Merek Bulfuron, the two Molten Hammers tried to convince their battle brother to stop dancing to the enemy's tune.

"Open your eyes, Merek!" Orthox boomed as he slammed the two statues on a table in front of the other expert pilot. "We're being manipulated by the human leader who we fought against. The glows these statues possess is similar to the ones carried by the human mechs we've previously met. You dueling against their expert swordsman mech, so you should know that these items are made by the same enemy who claimed to be Vulcan himself!"

Venerable Merek stared into Orthox's eyes for a moment before he settled his gaze onto the human statue.

"How dare you bring a representation of the great lie in my presence. Though I respect your contributions during the rebellion, you have obviously grown too senile for your own good."

Both Orthox and Kebrinore looked shocked at the Hivar Roarer expert pilot.

"Have you been listening to any word I've said, Merek? Neither of these statues are authentic! They are both fake. Just look at them and feel how equal they are. Aside from their stature and their facial hair, they are identical!"

"You're blind, Orthox."

"Pardon?"

"I said you're blind." Merek repeated. "Your old war wounds have caused your senses to dull. They're not equal at all! One of them is authentic while the other one is clearly a pathetic attempt to deceive our people."

"What? How can you say that when the glows of the two statues are the same."

"You disappoint me, Orthox. I have told you several times that this dwarven statue is the correct one. The other one is a heretical piece of work that needs to be destroyed on sight!"

It eventually dawned on Kebrinore and Orthox that their perception of the two idols differed from that of Merek.

To the latter, his strong belief in the Dwarven God Cult caused him to feel a lot of validation from the dwarven statue.

In contrast, the human statue prompted him to feel disgusted towards it. Merek simply couldn't recognize any similarities between this object and the one he admired the most!

The two veterans of the Molten Hammers looked increasingly more appalled. They realized that this trap was much more sophisticated than they thought.

To them, the two statues did appeal to them in some way, but did not find much purchase in their minds. Neither of the two possessed any religious tendencies and couldn't comprehend how any dwarf thought that one was clearly more authentic than the other.

Yet with a fellow expert pilot exhibiting the same kind of bias even when they were able to make direct comparisons, it seemed that it was much harder to shake the believers out of their delusions!

Venerable Orthox let out a frustrated grunt. "Why can't you connect the dots, Merek? Even if we ignore this human statue, you should at least recognize that this glow is the modus operandi of our most recent enemy. Our empire is being attacked by humans, but instead of recognizing this existential threat to our people, you're still thinking about fighting against Vulcanites!"

A restless air surrounded Venerable Merek. Despite Orthox's best attempts, the Hivar Roarer expert pilot remained deaf to the older man's pleas.

"I used to look up to you." Merek softly told Orthox. "No longer. Please get out of my sight. I will not let myself be swayed by the tools of the corrupt liars who deny the true Vulcan."

"We're not on the side of the Vulcan Faith!" Venerable Orthox angrily roared! "We're standing up on behalf of the innocent dwarves who are suffering and dying from all of

the infighting that people like you are engaged in. Wake up, Merek! I don't give a rat's beard whether Vulcan is a human or a dwarf, but if he is driving our fellow citizens to commit suicide, then I would rather tear him down myself!"

BOOM!

Venerable Orthox widened his eyes as his shield generator came to life and blocked a powerful kinetic projectile fired by the other expert pilot's gauss pistol.

"What are you doing, Merek?! You just shot against your own!"

A hateful expression emerged on Merek's face as his finger came close to pressing the trigger again. "You are not my brother. Your blasphemy against Vulcan is unforgivable. You should thank our god that you are carrying a shield generator, Orthox. If you say one more word against Vulcan, I will make sure you will never be able to spread heresy again."

"You..." General Kebrinore looked outraged. "You've fallen too deep into the trap. You don't even realize that you are dancing to the tune of our greatest enemy."

"Shut up, you failure! Both of you are lost in the glories of your past. Times have changed! Your fight is over now. Go home and stay put in your cages. Our people don't need your protection. Our people have to be protected against you!"

Venerable Orthox grew pale at this remark.

#### *Chapter 3325: Modern Tribalism*

The rapidly escalating upheaval taking place in the Vulcan Empire did not pass by unnoticed.

Many people outside of the Smiling Samuel Star Sector paid rapt attention to the news emerging from the powerful dwarven empire.

Few humans expressed sympathy for the turmoil taking place in the Vulcan Empire.

In fact, it was a lot more common to encounter expressions of glee and schadenfreude among the people who lived in fear next to the dwarves. The Empire of the Lost was particularly filled with humans who had either lost their homes and took great satisfaction in seeing the dwarves beat each other up over the silly question whether their god is a human or a dwarf!

"Who cares whether he is tall or short. As long as he doesn't show up, these crazy dwarves will keep killing each other!"



"I don't think this will go on. No one is that stupid. Both sides believe in the same god. It's not worth it to kill anyone else just because they believe that Vulcan looks like them or their enemies."

"This is all a trap! The Vulcanites are just pretending to fight against each other so they can lure us all in. Don't fall for it! As soon as one of us shows up, the dwarves will stop with their charade and unite forces in order to get a win over us humans!"

"Wait a minute. Don't these strange statues have the same features as the mechs fielded by that traveling clan? Maybe it has taken revenge!"

A lot of speculation circulated throughout the star cluster. A lot of news portals who had previously paid attention to the Battle of Fordilla Zentra and its participants soon connected the dots between the mysterious statues of Vulcan and the living mechs of the Larkinson Clan.

Those familiar with the infamous clan from the Komodo Star Sector even knew that their clan patriarch had a penchant for getting involved with various religions!

In fact, a lot of nosy journalists even dug up his notorious deeds in the Ylvaine Protectorate!

"This guy has a track record of exploiting religion to his own advantage!"

"Just look at the amount of states he visited that just happened to get ruined after his visits. Uh oh. He and his clan have currently been squatting in the Amswick System for quite some time. We need to get rid of him before he ruins the Empire of the Lost as well!"

Though Ves already attracted a fair amount of attention after the Battle of Fordilla Zentra, the crisis he single-handedly sparked in the Vulcan Empire put a spotlight on him. People were either happy or horrified at his clear act of revenge against the dwarves!

Just as expected, a lot of journalists and government officials really wanted to talk to Ves! If not, they at least wanted to obtain an explanation from the Larkinson Clan.

"It's not me, Benny!" Ves threw his hands up. "I'm not at fault!"

His personal assistant looked skeptical. "Really, boss? Then why do those two statue models work exactly like your mechs, your loyalty medallions, your various statues, your Larkinson Mandate and most notably your new hammer?"

"...Anyone could replicate or imitate my glows as long as they have the necessary know-how." Ves lamely replied. "There is an endless variety of technology available. Who knows whether a secret group used a fancy tech to make something that is similar

to my glows? I'm being falsely accused here! Don't believe in the stories. It's all fake news!"

Gavin crossed his arms. "I don't see why you need to perpetuate your denial. No one is accusing you of any crimes. The Empire of the Lost would be crazy to show any disapproval. Its citizens will skin their own leaders alive if that happens!"

"I'm not worried about the Empire of the Lost. What I'm really concerned about is the MTA. I'm not responsible, just to be clear, but if the mechers fell for the false narrative as well, I don't want to be taken into account!"

"If you are responsible, you at least have a valid casus belli. You could argue that the Larkinson Clan and the Vulcan Empire is unofficially at war since both of our military forces fought a frontal battle. Although the laws and such are probably a lot more tangled, no one will blame you for lashing out. The dwarves had it coming."

Ves smiled. "That's nice to hear, Benny, but it's not me. Don't get me wrong. I'm celebrating what is happening over there as well, but I'm just an innocent, uninvolved bystander. The only thing I can do is cheer and pat whoever is responsible for making and distributing those statues."

"You know, self-congratulation is a typical sign of narcissism. Only vain people keep patting themselves on the back all the time."

"That's an interesting but ultimately irrelevant curiosity."

"By the way, the amount of official and unofficial inquiries has gone through the roof. It is becoming increasingly harder for our Press Department to stonewall all of the requests we've received in the last couple of days. Do you know how many preposterous rumors are flying around due to a lack of clarification? We've found that a number of rumors are even spread as a deliberate attempt to discredit or besmirch our clan! As long as you hold a single official press conference, you can lay all of this unfounded gossip to rest. We urgently need to control the narrative."

"We don't need to do anything, Benny." Ves scoffed. "We owe nothing to the public. Just remain silent. Don't confirm or deny any allegations. Ever since we've returned to the Amswick System, we have done nothing but sit around while we wait for our repair jobs to finish. That's all. There's no reason to poke into our business any further."

Seeing that Ves stubbornly stuck to his denials, Gavin no longer pressed the matter further and addressed the next item on the agenda.

Later onwards, Minister Shederin Purnesse stopped by the same office. Ves was a lot less reticent this time.

"What are your thoughts on the current developments in the Vulcan Empire?" Ves shiftily asked while he laid Blinky on his lap and started stroking his spiritual pet.

Mrow~

If Lucky was here, Ves would have pampered him instead, but the gem cat had been wandering around more often as of late.

"The reactions exhibited by the Vulcanites so far have mostly matched my predictions." Shederin smugly smiled as he settled down on a chair. "The traditionalists have started to crack down on the radicals while the latter have escalated their attempted takeover of the state. Everything would have gone a lot more peacefully if the citizens of the Vulcan Empire were more mature and capable of critical thinking, but these two traits are sorely lacking in insular states."

"What are the chances that the dwarves regain their sanity and succeed in toning down the infighting in their state?"

"Without external intervention, the chances are low." The foreign minister brutally opined. "What I have witnessed up to this point only reinforces my judgement that the Vulcanites are too immature to run a state. Their statecraft is too primitive and they have failed to maintain a proper separation between church and state. They already set themselves up for failure from the beginning. We are just the ones to push them over a cliff."

"Will the dwarves fall to their death or will the more competent among them be able to deploy their antigrav clothing?"

"That's an interesting question." Shederin looked intrigued. "There are certainly wise and clear-minded individuals in the dwarven state who are aware of the greater truth behind your statues and their effect on the Vulcanites. That does not mean that our plan will fall through. The defining trait of fanatics is that they are highly committed to their respective causes or camps. Think of the two sides in this internal conflict as tribes. No matter whether a tribe is wrong, evil or at fault, its members will stand up for it and fight to the death to prove that they are right."

Modern tribalism was one of the worst impulses of humankind. It distracted the population and encouraged people to treat their fellow citizens as enemies of the state instead of peers who just happened to hold a different opinion.

Many states had met their downfall throughout the long history of human civilization. Whether the Vulcan Empire would join this long and ignoble list still remained to be seen. There were still factors that could hinder the dwarven state's collapse.

"I am paying attention to a number of actors, both Vulcanite and foreign." Minister Shederin mentioned. "The decisions they make and the stances they adopt will decide

the future of the Vulcan Empire. The most powerful and influential actor that can single-handedly stop or accelerate the dwarven state's collapse is the Mech Trade Association. In normal cases, the Association does not intervene in the rise and fall of states."

"This is not a normal case, though." Ves pointed out.

"You are correct in that, sir. The Mech Trade Association has its rules, but you can never completely predict their response. That said, my read on the situation is that the Vulcan Empire has become more of a liability than an asset to the Association. As long as that is the case, the mechers do not have a reason to relieve the Vulcanites of a crisis of their own making."

In other words, the dwarves were more trouble than they were worth. Their example showed that it was never a good idea to piss off a patron or guardian!

As the days went by, it became more obvious to other people that the dwarves weren't easily able to disentangle themselves from their sectarian strife.

Both sides believed in the same god, but they vehemently disagreed with each other on how to interpret him! Regular humans simply couldn't comprehend why such a detail was worth fighting and killing for. The escalating political and religious struggle in the Vulcan Empire seemed farcical if not for the fact that real lives were being lost with each passing day!

Ves instructed Minister Shederin to pay careful attention to any news concerning the MTA's unspoken support for the Vulcan Empire.

However, any mention of this topic was firmly left out of the public sphere. Though the charming old man had made a lot of friends during the time the Larkinson Clan stayed in Amswick, his contacts mostly consisted of other humans. None of them had access to any insider news.

All they heard was that the MTA and the highest levels of the Vulcan Empire's central administration held talks for many weeks. It appeared that the decision to preserve or revoke the MTA's guarantee was not a simple matter that could be decided by a single person on the spot.

This implied that there were a lot more interests involved than expected. Ves could not conceive of many reasons why this was the case.

He shrugged. "Oh well. If they wanted to save the Vulcan Empire, they shouldn't have dragged on the talks for so long."

The MTA's current behavior at least indicated that it was dissatisfied with the Vulcanites.

Ves predicted that the ongoing religious turmoil taking place in the Smiling Samuel Star Sector would only weaken the Vulcan Empire's case.

Everyone knew that the Mech Trade Association took a dim view on religions. The science-oriented organization might not be able to stop space peasants from falling for superstition, but it would never go out of its way to encourage its spread.

The sectarian strife that had engulfed the Vulcan Empire was one of the best examples why the MTA didn't want people to get caught up in religion! Warfare and conflict might be an intrinsic part of human nature but there were far better things to fight about than trying to prove an imaginary point!

"If these dwarves have any brains, they should have realized that gods aren't always benevolent."

#### *Chapter 3326: The Human Cost*

The infighting within the Vulcan Empire grew worse. Even with leaders such as the Grand Regent of the Vulcan Empire urging their fellow dwarves to take a step back in consideration of the greater good, the religious fanatics on both sides refused to take these calls seriously.

In their opinion, they were already fighting for the 'greater good'! It was just that their opponents happened to adhere to a different interpretation of what this actually meant.

Since the followers of both the Vulcan Faith and the Dwarven God Cult believed that they were absolutely in the right, a compromise was out of reach! Due to doctrinal issues, it was unthinkable for the dwarven fanatics to walk back their fervent opinions.

With their friends, their peers and their leaders advocating for purity, any dwarves who showed insufficient piety would no longer fit in with the crowd!

It was for this reason that even the less devout and more reticent dwarves were pulled into the conflict. Perhaps they originally didn't pay much attention to Vulcan in their daily lives, but when their entire neighborhoods and workplaces became swept by the same fever, there was no escape!

More and more incidents, battles and tragedies took place under Vulcan's name. The news emerging from the Vulcan Empire got so bad that Ves no longer checked the news portals.

A part of him felt troubled at what he had unleashed upon the state. Not every citizen had it coming. There were trillions of average dwarves who just lived a normal job and went about their day without bothering anyone. It was the influencers and decision makers in their society who truly called the shots.

Ves would have preferred to keep his revenge action more proportional. If he had the choice to target the leaders and cadre of the Dwarven God Cult, then he would have chosen this option without a doubt.

However, he didn't possess the power or ability to do so. His only means of attack required the cooperation of both the friendly dwarves and the unfriendly dwarves.

"After all, a civil war can't be waged if only one side is willing to fight." He muttered.

Since the believers of the human Vulcan and the dwarven Vulcan were both riled up at once, neither side was able to overpower the other! This was the best way to produce a damaging internal struggle where total strength of the Vulcan Empire was being consumed on a continuous basis!

It became increasingly more difficult for onlookers to remain composed when they heard about the events unfolding in the dwarven state.

The Empire of the Lost accelerated its mobilization efforts. More reservists were being activated than ever and the budget allocated to the armed forces had jumped by 50 percent. Several mech divisions were being moved to the border every couple of days and regular consumer trade began to grow increasingly more scarce.

The Lost were both afraid and eager at what was happening. They were ecstatic to see the Vulcanites beating each other up, yet they were also afraid at the possibility the dwarves would suddenly make up and direct their aggression outwards!

While the humans in the star cluster geared up for war, the discussion within the Larkinson Clan also became more heated.

As the people who worked with glows on a daily or even hourly basis, the Larkinsons couldn't be more clear who had single-handedly messed up the Vulcan Empire! No matter whether Ves denied responsibility for what was happening, the clansmen knew better than to believe the Larkinson Clan had nothing to do with what was happening over at the next star sector!

Opinions differed on whether it was proper to retaliate this way.

"The dwarves deserve to get punished! They attacked us with the intent to wipe us all out. Why do they deserve leniency when we are simply returning the favor?"

"You bigot! Not every dwarf deserves to get killed. There are entire planets filled with innocent civilians who are losing their lives and the lives of their loved ones due to the expanding crossfire."

"Aren't we doing something illegal? From what I can tell, we've been brainwashing their leaders through the use of our glows. I don't know how you can justify such an act!"

There were many clansmen who began to develop a guilty conscience over what 'their clan' was doing to the Vulcan Empire.

Others were much less sympathetic towards the dwarves.

Though Ves was able to avoid meeting with outsiders while this incident grew worse, he couldn't do the same to his own clansmen.

Some of them insisted on speaking with Ves in person! Just as expected, Venerable Jannzi managed to get a hold of him first!

"Ves! What are you doing?!" Jannzi asked as she stormed into his office.

"Ugh, I'm not in the mood to enter into a moralistic discussion with you." Ves tiredly said as he leaned back on his chair and began to throw a chunk of mineral in the air.

"Meow!"

Lucky darted upwards and caught the little snack with excellent skill. The gem cat eagerly enjoyed his prize as he continued to drift away.

The female expert pilot ignored the cat and marched over to the desk before she pressed her hands on the surface. She leaned forward.

"Your vindictiveness is going too far. Do you even realize how much of loss of life your stupid statues have caused?"

"The Vulcanites are our enemies, Jannzi. Did you see them hesitate in trying to take down our ships? If we hadn't received advance warning and evacuated our civilian population to our capital ships, then thousands more clansmen would have died! If the Ferril Provincial Army succeeded in defeating our mech army, then I have no doubt that the dwarves would have killed every clansman they came across regardless of their threat!"

"You can't stoop to their level! We're better than that. We're Larkinsons. Even if you care nothing about our reputation, our honor demands we do not unnecessarily endanger civilians. What you're doing right now is butchery instead of honorable combat!"

Ves sighed and shook his head.

"This is war, Jannzi. We're not the ones who provoked this fight. We're not the ones who acted dishonorably first. Besides, this is the only way a clan as weak as ours can fight against a powerful second-rate state. Do you want us to commit suicide by heading back to the Vulcan Empire so we can fight a traditional battle again? We'll get crushed by superior numbers!"



The expert pilot looked frustrated. "You didn't have to pick a fight against the Vulcan Empire to begin with! Look, it is true they attacked us, but that doesn't necessarily mean we should enter into a vendetta with them. It's best to let go and leave the dwarves behind. Prolonging our stay here will only lead to further avoidable bloodshed. Just look at what the Vulcanites have been doing to each other as a result of your actions."

She activated her comm and projected some sordid news stories.

[DWARVEN GOD CULTISTS BURNED DOWN A PRIVATE SCHOOL WITH STUDENTS INSIDE - 600 CHILDREN DEAD AND COUNTING]

[16 MECHS OPENED FIRE ON A DENSELY-POPULATED SLUM TO DESTROY SEVERAL HIDDEN REBEL BASES. 12,000 DWARVES HAVE DIED FROM COLLATERAL DAMAGE.]

[PASSENGER SHIP CARRYING SENIOR PRIEST OF VULCAN FAITH HAS BEEN HIJACKED AND CRASHED, RESULTING IN LOSS OF LIFE OF ALL CREW AND PASSENGERS]

Jannzi not only showed him the headlines, but also ran some footage.

"My baby! My baby!" A dwarven mother kneeled in front of a collapsed house in a random town.

The fighting on that planet had not spread to the smaller towns, but the reason why the mother lost her infant was because a fight had taken place in orbit. A piece of space debris had fallen from the sky and crashed onto the woman's house, leading to a tragic loss that should have never occurred!

This was the least impactful consequence that Jannzi brought up. She also presented more disturbing footage.

"Look at what your actions have wrought, Ves. I'm not letting you get away with this by pretending that your actions are only hurting the bad guys."

The next footage displayed a much larger tragedy. Hundreds of fallen mechs littered the streets of a major city. This was a large and densely populated region that was packed with urbanite dwarves.

In its prime, the city was a bustling financial and creative center. Millions of dwarves either lived here or commuted to this city to go to work.

Now, the gleaming skyscrapers had collapsed and entire apartment complexes burned into blackened husks. The collateral damage resulting from this unrestrained battle between two opposing groups that just happened to possess a lot of mechs had reached apocalyptic levels!

Tens of thousands more parents were digging through the ruins or pleading to the emergency services to help rescue their loved ones from underneath the rubble. The fighting had been so intense that the entire city district was totally ruined!

Few people and organizations based in this area had much relation with the ongoing struggle. Only a fraction of the citizens who lived and worked in this bustling metropolis consisted of militant fanatics. The overwhelming majority of dwarves who failed to evacuate to the underground emergency shelters in time were merely implicated because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time!

It was hard for Ves to remain indifferent when his least favorite expert pilot in the clan confronted him with the living cost of his far-reaching ploy.

"Tragedies like these aren't one-off incidents." She stated. "They happen over and over at different planets because there are too many dwarves out there that are convinced that 'Vulcan' is cheering them on, and they're right! Even now, I sense the smugness leaking from your body."

"You're going too far, Jannzi!" Ves barked back as he grew indignant at her judgemental behavior. "We live in a complicated society and we can't always ensure that the innocents remain unaffected. I don't like what is happening, but the statues did not force the Vulcanites to turn their weapons against their fellow brothers. Those impulses came from themselves. If they weren't harboring thoughts about fighting against their own kind, the tragedies they caused wouldn't have been so enormous."

He stared up at her. Jannzi's will continued to press down on Ves in an attempt to make him acquiesce.

It didn't work. Ves faced tougher circumstances before and his mental strength had grown since he gained his new incarnation.

"I can't tell you the full story, but there is a good reason why I've been trying to get into the Vulcan Empire." He softly replied. "What I'm doing at the moment is meant to accomplish a specific purpose. As soon as I get what I want, I'll leave the Fermi Star Cluster and all of its stupidity behind right away."

Jannzi narrowed her eyes. "Really?"

"Hey, what do you take me for, a sadist? Do I look like a heartless bastard who gets happy whenever he hears the screams of parents who lost their children? Do you think that I am rooting for the Vulcanites to slaughter each other en masse until the entire Smiling Samuel Star Sector is depopulated?"

"..."

"You're not going to change, are you?"

He shrugged. "I have a plan. It's still on track. I see no need to change any details. The dwarves could have prevented all of this if they just let us travel through their space without plotting to kill us all. They can still prevent further tragedies from occurring if they just put down their extremism and accept that regular humans don't deserve to be killed."

"That's impossible, and you know that. You can't just make an entire culture turn its back on its traditions and sincerely held beliefs."

"Then maybe the culture in question shouldn't have existed in the first place." Ves retorted. "Not every state and culture are good. Some are so reprehensible that we would be doing a favor by wiping them off the map!"

"And who gets to decide which ones get to exist and which ones need to be eliminated? I sure as hell hope it isn't you, because the galaxy will become a darker place if you are in charge!"

#### *Chapter 3327: The Statue War*

Though Venerable Jannzi gave him a lot of grief, she could do little else but rant in front of his face.

She lacked the power and authority to hinder his plans. Her influence was not small, but her weight in the clan was not heavy enough to make him think twice.

Of course, it was a mistake to dismiss her so easily. Even though Venerable Jannzi didn't have any meaningful way to stop Ves from triggering a civil war within the Vulcan Empire, more and more Larkinsons learned about her principled stance and her noble opposition against an immoral and uncaring patriarch.

She not only managed to take the high ground, but also blackened her opponent's reputation in the process. As long as several more incidents like these took place, Ves would see his reputation sink to the point where he had no credibility left!

"I can't let that happen." He frowned.

The problem was that the only way for Ves to keep Venerable Jannzi from gaining more influence was to maintain the respect and support of his clansmen.

Ordinarily, that wasn't so difficult as he frequently made sure that their needs were taken care of in the clan.

What truly put him at risk was when his decisions got Larkinsons killed or when he engaged in 'dishonorable' acts.

Most clansmen didn't want to die. They also didn't want to degenerate into butchers. Ves knew it was wrong at some level to implicate the entire civilian population of the Vulcan Empire, but he didn't let his conscience get in the way of his goals.

"The next phase will start soon." He whispered.

Though he no longer looked up any specific news articles about the infighting between the dwarves, he was still aware of how the crisis was unfolding from a macro perspective.

More and more planets and provinces were becoming engulfed in war. Though there were plenty of reasons for the extremists on both sides to back off, the militant dwarves had suffered too much and sacrificed too many lives to stop at this point.

Victory was all that mattered to the radicals and traditionalists! The immaturity and lack of perspective that Minister Shederin had spoken about caused the dwarves to lack a crucial quality that could have let the calmer heads among them negotiate a compromise.

As a result, a lot of mechs and war assets that were initially meant to fight against the tall folk were instead employed to kill shorties just like themselves!

Neither side of the conflict was capable of showing any respect for their adversaries. They completely forgot about their true opponents and regarded their former neighbors and friends as their archenemies!

The dwarves were too prideful to back out. The bravest Vulcanites were those who fought for their beliefs just like the rebels of old. Many believed that if the heretical beliefs of their enemies became dominant, then the true Vulcan god would forsake the dwarven state and turn its back on its own people!

In the words of many fervent priests, this struggle was not just about setting the record straight whether Vulcan was a human or a dwarf. It was an existential crisis where the truth could save the entire state and where embracing the wrong version of Vulcan could literally cause their god to forsake his flock!

With stakes this high, it was no surprise that the infighting unfolded into an outright civil war!

A new rebellion had erupted as the massive state split into two different camps!

Many provinces mostly fell into one or the other camp, but there were plenty of places where both sides were equally as strong! These battleground provinces turned into the hotspots of the sector-wide civil war as the traditional believers and the radical cultists sought to expand their territory and obtain enough superiority to suppress their opponents!

When Minister Shederin stopped by in order to explain what was going on, he called up a map of the Vulcan Empire.

“The dwarven state is not a monolithic entity, as I have explained before. There are strong regional identities that are based around provinces. Each province is the equivalent of a small-to-medium state in any other star sector. Capturing them and keeping them is key to winning this civil war.”

Ves nodded in understanding as he inspected the map. “I see that the rebel cultists have more provinces in their hands than the central authority.”

“That is correct, sir, but don’t let this map fool you.” Shederin said as he switched the view to one that showed the GDP of every province. “The Dwarven God Cult initially gained influence in the lesser provinces and planets of the Vulcan Empire. The majority of these provinces are less densely populated and are not as developed as the more central provinces. The Uriburn Province that is firmly in the grip of the Vulcan Faith is worth at least five times more than the Ferril Province.”

Indeed, the provinces held by the central authority were much more developed in almost every criteria.

The question was whether this was enough to keep the fight even.

“Who has the advantage?” Ves asked.

“That is not an easy question to answer. The central authority that officially supports the Vulcan Faith is still in charge of most of the military. While there are mech regiments and even entire mech divisions that have defected to the extremist dwarves, there is no denying that the rebels do not grasp as many military units.”

“Doesn’t that mean the central authority can crush the cultists?”

Shederin shook his head. “There are many more factors that could even up this struggle. The Dwarven God Cult effectively controls the majority of the provinces. They can draw a large amount of mercenary or private forces under their banner to bolster their numbers. The combat effectiveness of these irregular troops might not be as good as their professional military counterparts, but the advantage of numbers is a powerful boon.”

Ves also figured out another difference. “If my guess is right, there should also be an enthusiasm gap between the two sides. The Dwarven God Cult has always been good at poaching worshippers from the Vulcan Faith, and that is not without reason. The cultists have a better story and they are much more enthusiastic about worshipping their dwarven god.”

“The enthusiasm gap isn’t as big as you think. The Vulcan Faith has enjoyed a resurgence as of late due to your human statues. The extremists who have seen your work in person are just as fanatic about their beliefs as their enemy counterparts. However, you are correct that the largest group of supporters are less fervent on average.”

This resulted in an interesting asymmetrical matchup.

The central authority had to rely on the abundant number of professional military units under its control to regain control over its provinces.

The rebel cultists had the advantage of numbers and overall morale and needed to rely more heavily on its grassroots units to squeeze the territories of their enemies.

As the civil war continued to heat up, this was exactly what happened. The mech regiments that remained loyal to the grand regent were able to defeat many forces that fought on behalf of the Dwarven God Cult.

Unlike the Larkinson Clan, many private armies and irregular forces didn’t possess trump cards such as battle networks. There was also a distinct gap in the amount of expert pilots that both sides could field.

However, the forces aligned to the Dwarven God Cult began to avoid frontal battles whenever possible. They still had plenty of military officers at their side who soon formulated a new strategy.

The rebel forces began to gnaw at many different territories controlled by their enemies at once. They refrained from attacking the highly-populated industrial strongholds and instead sought to sweep aside resistance on many different rural systar systems!

The military under the control of the central authority couldn’t afford to split up its troops and send them off to all of the smaller sites. That would just dilute their strength and make them vulnerable to being defeated in detail!

“We’re getting attacked from a thousand different directions.” a traditionalist general stated. “We can’t let these rebels take over all of our farming planets. Our urbanized planets are too densely populated to be able to feed themselves.”

“Can’t our urban population subside on nutrient packs for a time?”

“Our stockpile of nutrient packs is enormous, but it was never designed to keep entire planets fed for years!”

“That’s not the only issue. The Dwarven God Cult has already taken over most of our peripheral provinces. If the cultists gain even more ground, they can form a blockade

around the space that we effectively control, thereby squeezing out any trade that keeps our bellies filled and our industrial war engine running.”

This was indeed a grave concern! There were more factors at play that worsened the position of the central authority in the long term. The dwarves who inherited the belief that Vulcan was a human thought that they were in the right. They could not allow the upstart liars to erase the truth and rob Vulcan’s glory from their proud state!

Another general pointed at a core star system controlled by the opposition. “If time is on their side, then we will have to win the war before our window of opportunity is lost. I propose we launch an offensive on their strongholds and take the fight to their territories!”

“The price is too big! It is easier to defend than to attack a location. We will bleed heavily if we wish to take over most of their core systems.”

“Then what would you have us do instead? We cannot keep acting like turtles when there are ants drilling through our cavities. Given the current conditions, we cannot outlast the rebels. If we attempt to do so, we will only run our military units ragged.”

There were more arguments in favor of going on the attack than to maintain a defensive posture. Once the leaders had made the decision, their mech armies quickly launched massive offensives onto the major star systems controlled by the enemy!

If the collateral damage was already bad before, now the amount of dwarven lives that were being lost had reached meteoric proportions!

What surprised people like Ves about this civil war was how quickly it escalated.

Unlike the Komodo War where the Friday Coalition and the Hexadric Hegemony each occupied different sides of the star sector, the Vulcanite civil war was characterized by lots of immediate contact between the two sides!

Provinces and star systems belonging to one side often burdened a territory that belonged to the other side!

If possible, a mech unit stationed in one of these places only needed to make a single, direct FTL hop in order to launch an assault on an enemy position!

Incidents like this took place in thousands of different conflict areas. Some local commanders didn’t even wait for instructions from their higher ups before they commanded their troops to barge into an enemy star system and fight the supposed heretics who believed in the wrong version of Vulcan!



Hundreds of thousands of dwarven mechs were clashing against each other with little regard for self-preservation. The most celebrated soldiers were those who were willing to give it all and die for their righteous beliefs!

“Tear down the corrupt rulers!”

“Wipe out the incorrigible rebels!”

The conflict that eventually became known as the Statue War started off so hard and so suddenly that neither side had made adequate preparations.

Plenty of mistakes, misunderstandings and missteps caused the dwarves from both sides to blunder more often or collapse sooner than expected. The bloodshed that ensued from all of the chaotic battles could fill entire oceans.

The entire Smiling Samuel Star Sector was dyed in red!

To think that all of this came to pass because Ves mailed 2000 of his own handicrafts to different dwarves.

“It’s not my fault.” He insisted to himself. “The Vulcanites started this fight. I’m just finishing it. My response is definitely proportionate!”

#### *Chapter 3328: Earnest Plea*

The Statue War had engulfed the Vulcan Empire at a rapid pace.

Just a month ago, none of the Vulcanites expected their state to descend into all-out warfare.

How could they have known that one of their past actions came back to haunt them in the worst way possible?

To outside observers, the most confounding aspect about this man-made disaster was that the scheme wasn't even that well-hidden.

Anyone familiar with the Larkinson Clan's distinctive mechs could tell that the Vulcanites had been hoodwinked by one of their recent enemies!

It didn't even matter if a significant part of the population and leadership were aware that Patriarch Ves Larkinson was playing them like a musical instrument.

The most brilliant part about this devious scheme was that it worked even if its nefarious nature was exposed!

As long as the most extreme firebrands among the two different religions got ahold of the mysterious statues, their belief in Vulcan intensified to the point of becoming an absolute, unshakable conviction!

Even expert pilots weren't as intransigent as a believer who had personally encountered their deity!

Inside a grand meeting chamber built to provide the representatives of the Vulcan Empire with the illusion of grandeur, the mood had grown heavy.

Grand Regent Habidas Aaden, blood kin to the greatest hero of the dwarven revolution, looked tired.

The continual crises and challenges that had erupted in recent times had tested his patience beyond its limits.

He was tired.

Even though he delegated many crucial tasks to his capable friends and subordinates, the severity of the disasters unfolding in his empire demanded his attention day and night.

No matter how this turbulent time eventually came to a conclusion, Habidas Aaden did not want to be known as a ruler who slept behind the helm as his starship crashed into a moon!

"Regent..." An older friend who sat at his side whispered to him. "I fear that Vulcan's favor is not enough to shine a light on us today."

The bearded ruler could not bring himself to summon any optimism from his tired mind and body. "Let us wait until we have heard the verdict from the tribunal. We have made our case to the best of our abilities. The last thing the Mech Trade Association wants is to create an incident where dwarves are being subjugated by humans. The optics look terrible."

The Grand Regent had no doubt that the representatives of the same organization could hear exactly what he was saying. By his reckoning, they had long known what he and his representatives would say before every meeting.

The correct procedures still had to be followed. They conveyed legitimacy, ensured that everyone was able to make themselves understood and allowed him to impart emotion into the arguments he thought were crucial.

Now, the time had come to see whether all of his efforts and the efforts of his staff yielded the desired result.

"Mr. Aaden." A stern-looking human spoke from the other end of the conference table. Four more humans like him hovered at his sides. "We have heard your arguments and conferred among ourselves on the merits of your pleas. We are aware that the lives of trillions of heavy gravity variant humans will be affected by our verdict. To ensure we come to the fairest conclusion, we have kept our silence for more weeks than necessary because we are inclined to give your people a chance to redeem themselves."

Habidas Aaden's heart sank when he heard those words.

"It is... regrettable... that your subjects have shown little redeeming features." The man announced with little emotion. "Your folk claim to be more superior than baseline humanity, yet their conduct reminds us of our worst traits. We have witnessed grand displays of ignorance, bigotry, racism, idolatry and further undesirable behavior. Though we recognize that many of your citizens are sufficiently enlightened, your state does not give them the voice they deserve. Instead, your Vulcan Empire gives voice to the loudest speakers who claim to fight for their particular interpretation of their god."

The man had not been kind in his description of the Vulcan people. It was all true, yet it obscured too much of the goodness the dwarves still possessed.

"If this were not the case, our conclusion may have taken a different direction. We have waited for more weeks than necessary to see whether there are any redeeming factors in your state and people. To our great disappointment, we have continually observed that your most regressive elements have been allowed to silence the dwindling amount of reasonable voices in your state. We judge that your state will only grow more beholden to extremist individuals who are inclined to abuse their authority to spread even more ignorance and bigotry."

The grand regent wanted to stand up and argue against the MTA representative's verdict, but his fear and despair kept him in place.

Habidas Aaden knew the character of the MTA. Once its representatives made up their mind, they were not open to any further persuasion.

Their authority was absolute, and their official declarations were final!

The MTA representative stared right into Habidas Aaden's eyes. "Our verdict is as follows. We revoke our confidential agreement to guarantee the independence of the Vulcan Empire. Our Association cannot in good conscience provide support to a state that has not only failed to guide its citizens to an enlightened future, but has instead brought them back to a past where humanity slew each other for the most illogical of justifications."

The dwarven delegation all looked defeated at the news. They had anticipated that this might happen, but they always held out hope that the mechers would give them a second chance.

"The founding mission of the Mech Trade Association is to promote the advancement of humankind." The imperious representative stated in a lecturing tone. "We have taken charge of a fractured species that has barely overcome its darkest time, and we have succeeded in repairing the damage wrought by runaway technology and power-hungry despots. We do not look kindly to any state or group that seeks to reverse the gains we have made in the past four centuries. Humanity in the Age of Mechs does not require the existence of the Vulcan Empire in its current form."

The Mech Trade Association emerged during the darkest days of the Age of Conquest to combat all of the scourges that threatened to make humanity undo itself. Despite the best efforts of Habidas Aaden and his fellow dwarves, they had failed to convince the extremists from gaining more influence in the state.

Too many dwarves didn't want to get saved by the MTA! The short-sighted fools who pledged their loyalty to Vulcan instead of their fellow citizens were utterly incorrigible and did not realize what kind of deals that leaders such as Habidas Aaden had made to preserve their dwarven utopia.

The MTA representatives did not provide any further clarification or any hint of remorse. To them, the galaxy was filled with so many different states and polities that the future of a single dwarven was only a mild curiosity to them. Each of these highborn dignitaries gave out the impression that their time was better spent on other matters.

Their forms shimmered as they teleported directly from the grand meeting room. The dwarves who sat on the other side of the long table looked desolate and defeated.

"Grand regent..."

"The MTA has spoken." Habidas Aaden slowly stood up from his short chair. "Yet their voice does not speak for our people. Remember who we are. We are dwarves, the sons of Vulcan and the undergods of the galaxy. Are we going to lay our feet at the judgement of the most high-handed tall folk in existence or are we going to fight and prove them wrong?!"

The dwarves around him perked up a bit as their leader roused them with his attitude.

Habidas Aaden tugged at his bushy blond beard. "Each of you must have thought I would have shaved my beard in shame by now, correct? Well you'll have to wait as I am not going to let this verdict put the nail in the coffin!"

"The Vulcan Empire shall exist forever!"

"Dwarvenkind must prove the tall folk wrong!"

"That's the spirit!" Habidas grinned. "Vulcan has not yet forsaken us. Though there are many dwarves who purport to speak for our great god, make no mistake. These

enchanted and bedeviled fools are unknowingly tearing our society down. Exposing them and persuading them to see reason is our highest priority. We cannot defeat our militant citizens head-on. We must persuade them to lay down their arms on their own accord, whatever it takes. I want to hear plans. What suggestions do you have that we might yet employ?"

An advisor spoke up. "We must squash the Dwarven God Cult and stop their attempted coup. Though the adherents of the Vulcan Faith are not much better, they are on our side, at least. As long as we have defeated the heretical cultists who actively seek to start a war against the tall folk, the remaining traditional believers will slowly put down their weapons as there are no enemies left to fight."

Not everyone thought this was a good idea.

"The Dwarven God cultists are awful, but that doesn't mean our own side is without fault. We need to rein in our own loyalists and bring them under our command! Their violent acts and their disregard for civilian casualties is putting us in a bad light!"

"And how would you possibly rein in the militants by our side? They are being attacked on all fronts! Passive defense is not a solution. We must take the fight to the enemy and squash their powerbase before they can fully leverage their advantage in numbers."

Habidas grimly smiled. Though few of these suggestions sounded viable, at least his circle had shaken off their despair. There was still hope for the Vulcan Empire, though the window of opportunity was minimal.

He looked up at the high-vaulted ceilings and the decorative windows that depicted the greatest heroes of the Vulcan Empire fighting the great cause.

The dwarves of old operated in much more barren circumstances than today. The original rebels of Desala X had launched their first act of resistance with a band of ill-trained, ill-informed miners and with no mech in their possession.

Their awful battle wagons could barely fight against the local guard mechs while their sole mech pilot had to borrow a mech from the enemy in order to deliver the paltry resistance movement its first victory!

The stories told by the survivors of this desperate, foolhardy engagement were mixed and contradictory. None of the dwarves back then were academically-trained historians or chroniclers and their educational development was frankly abysmal.

Yet their lack of existing constraints and their unique perspectives produced colorful stories that had turned into a collection of revered myths that guided the Vulcanites to this day.

The subject of Vulcan was one of the most oft-spoken elements in those first-hand accounts. Each of the rebels vouched for the dwarven deity's existence and descent. Habidas Aaden's grand-uncle was the first and only known dwarf to have served as a vessel to the God of Dwarves, Mechs and Craftsmanship. Solid proof of his enlightened creations and influence left no doubt to the Vulcanites that their patron and protector had once blessed their folk with his guiding hand!

Grand Regent Habidas Aaden closed his eyes and pressed his strong and meaty palms together in prayer.

"Lend us your aid, Vulcan. Grace us with your wisdom once again. I am wholeheartedly willing to sacrifice my body and soul so that you may descend upon me in our darkest hour. The future of dwarvenkind is at stake. Too many of your worshippers have gone mad with zeal due to a lack of guidance. If you can just appear before us once again and speak through a willing vessel such as myself, you can save the Vulcan Empire and every dwarf who reveres you as our guardian! Please give us a sign!"

The grand regent failed to obtain a response... Vulcan, it appeared, was deaf to his pleas.

#### *Chapter 3329: Second Try*

Despite the best efforts of Grand Regent Habidas Aaden, his influence was hardly felt in the state that had descended into insanity.

Priests, not statesmen, were in charge these days. Devotion and purity were much more important qualifiers to commanding over people than intelligence and expertise.

Even though many people recognized that the whole premise and motivation of the Statue War was stupid and self-destructive from the onset, the two sides who claim to fight for the correct version of Vulcan did not see it that way.

To them, they were fighting for the true god! If they won, the Vulcan Empire would be saved! If they lost or did nothing, then their enemies would drown their great dwarven state in perpetual darkness as Vulcan's light left the forsaken dwarves.

Against this kind of logic, the dwindling number of non-religious and moderate dwarves failed to persuade their militant brothers and sisters from seeking compromise.

When certain high-placed members of the dwarven society received word of the MTA's resolution, they began to make their own moves, ones that did not involve their maddened cousins.

Two beardless old dwarves looked through the window of a military space station. Several damaged and half-repaired capital ships including the Great Ram were docked onto the arms that stretched out from the orbital base like antennas.

Numerous shuttles and transports flew in and out of the fleet carriers, bringing in cargo and personnel at an industrious pace.

Many dwarven soldiers, of which the men all lacked their distinctive beards, were undergoing their final check-in procedures as they waited to board their respective vessels.

The large amount of luggage bots carrying their bags and trunks signified that these disgraced Ferril soldiers were about to go on a long trip.

General Kebrinore and Venerable Orthox both looked grave, the latter more than the former.

"I received my orders this morning." The dwarven general spoke. "High command reactivated us in order to march against our own brothers."

"Our mission?" The expert pilot gruffly asked.

"The provincial governor wants us to assist the other mobs aligned with the Dwarven God Cult in raiding the rural star systems of the Uriburn Province. If we cannot hold the central authority's territory, we are to burn and destroy any useful infrastructure that keeps the planets working and useful to the province. Think about destroying space stations, bombarding factories, taking out local government structures and so on. We even have orders to raze the farmland wholesale if we have the time. If the Statue War drags on long enough, our superiors think that starving the opposition is a viable tactic."

The more Venerable Orthox listened, the more he lost faith in the Ferril Province. Most of the decision makers had already fallen under the sway of the Dwarven God Cult. They took over its radical policies and ideology and stooped at nothing to gain an advantage over their opponents!

He felt more and more powerless to prevent this maddening war from growing more destructive. His beardless state turned him from a war hero into a loser. Though there were still dwarves who respected his identity, the public had long dismissed his warnings and pleas because they did not align with popular opinion.

The Ferril Province along with many other provinces had completely fallen under the sway of the two polarizing religious denominations!

Thinking about what had befallen his precious state caused Orthox's will to become more depressed. As an expert pilot, he was good at smashing powerful mechs.

It did not turn him into a powerful politician or charismatic leader, though. Even at his prime, his influence only allowed him to command more attention than other expert pilots. The true players of the Vulcan Empire were much more capable of taking control of the population.



At this time, Venerable Orthox would rather be a politician than a high-tier expert pilot. What was the use of extraordinary martial skill when he was helpless to stop his fellow dwarves from slaughtering each other?

It was a dark irony that the dwarven authority figures who possessed voices that were able to sway a lot of people had fallen under the sway of a human enemy. Devil Tongue, indeed.

"How are the men?" Orthox asked with a touch of concern. "These are the last men that are still willing to listen to us. Are there any fanatics or cultists among them that can poison our remaining well?"

"We know our people well enough to filter out the crazies." Kebrinore answered. "It's the allies that we've invited that can pose a risk to us. I have no doubt that there are fanatics among our crew that have dedicated their lives to either the human or dwarven version of Vulcan. However, once we are on the move, we operate under a different environment. As long as our fellow compatriots are of the same mind as us, these fanatics will eventually give themselves away, allowing us to handle them as we see fit."

The dwarven expert pilot looked resigned. "I never want to fight against my fellow dwarves, especially when we are part of the same state. However, we cannot let our fleet descend in the same sectarian madness that is tearing our homeland apart. If we must eliminate a small number of dwarves to protect a larger group of dwarves, then so be it. Anyone who has signed up for our venture has made a promise not to bring the ailments affecting the Vulcan Empire to our gathering. I will not be lenient to anyone that has violated our rules."

"As it should, old friend. Are you ready to speak to the men?"

Venerable Orthox remained silent for a moment. "Do I even deserve to address them? I failed them in the field of battle."

"We all failed on the battlefield that day, Orthox. My responsibility for our defeat is even greater than yours." General Kebrinore said. "We can't dwell on it anymore. We need to look forward, and to help our men do that, they need to pursue a new dream. What we need the most in this dire time is a visionary who can lead them to a new home. Can you do that, old friend? Can you regain your old fire and present a strong image that people are willing to follow?"

"...I shall make an attempt."

Kebrinore smiled and patted Orthox's shoulder. "That is all I am asking from you. Your people need you. Go out there and make yourself heard."

Time passed by as the fleet carriers that nominally belonged to the Molten Hammers finished stocking up on goods and personnel.

Venerable Orthox stepped onto the bridge of the Great Ram and nodded to General Kebrinore before he stood at the center.

He looked down at the deck. A large hammer had been painted on this exact spot. It conveyed both strength and resistance to many dwarves. Now, the high-tier expert pilot sought to draw strength from this same symbol as well!

A tech held out his outstretched hand at the side. "Broadcast going online in three, two, one, you're live!"

Lights shone on the beardless expert pilot from above as he attracted the attention of tens of thousands of Vulcanites.

"Men, each of you have made a choice." He began without much thought. "I made a choice as well. Due to the civil war that has erupted throughout our entire state, our superiors sought fit to pull us out of the dog house."

His lips curled into a contemptuous sneer. "Yet rather than calling upon us to protect our civilians and seek a resolution of this conflict, we instead received orders to bully and rob the livelihoods of other civilians! No matter which province they live in, they are still fellow dwarves. To treat them as our opponents just because a bewitching statue told us to do it is madness! I don't know about you, but I will not allow myself to be a part of his dwarf-on-dwarf violence!"

Venerable Orthox spread his arms. "I am immensely pleased that you share my sentiments as well. Each of us has pledged an oath to protect the Vulcan Empire from threats that seek to undermine it. We may not be able to fulfill this oath on a literal basis, but we can still fulfill the spirit of our duties! The greater population of the Vulcan Empire may be lost to us, but the people we have gathered in our evacuation fleet can still be saved! Through our efforts, we can preserve some of the best parts of our culture while off-loading the rotten elements that have put our once-great state beyond redemption."

Though the dwarven expert pilot sought to phrase his point in an aspirational light, he and many other dwarves knew full well what they were truly trying to do. They were deserting their own state and absconding with valuable military assets while they were at it! Instead of trying to save every Vulcanite that still wanted to be saved, the former soldiers were turning their backs on these dwarves!

The deserting dwarves could only do so much with the power and influence they had left.

Still, the evacuation fleet was able to bring away enough dwarves to keep the essence of their state alive!

"Each of you knows where we are heading." Venerable Orthox said as he lightened his tone. "Smiling Samuel has no place for us anymore. The rest of the Fermi Star Cluster

hates us. I seriously doubt that any other state in the galactic rim will welcome the arrival of close-knit dwarves like us. There is only one good destination available to us, and that is the Red Ocean."

The dwarf paused and closed his eyes as he imagined how their dwarven evacuation fleet would fare in the new galaxy.

"It is in this new region of space opened up by the MTA and CFA where we can truly do dwarvenkind justice. The old galaxy is already occupied by an endless amount of human polities. Setting up a dwarven state in this environment constantly forces our people to resist the greedy humans. I have no doubt we will encounter the same treatment in the new frontier, but the territories there have yet to be divvied by all of the pioneers. It is there that we shall found a proper dwarven state."

Talk of founding a potential new state finally prompted Venerable Orthox to smile.

"Our people's first attempt at erecting a sovereign dwarven state has failed. Our society was flawed and our culture was too beholden to religious influences. We shall address these vulnerabilities and seek to build a more tolerant and open-minded state. As much as we hate the tall folk for mistreating our fellow dwarves, we cannot cling to this grievance if we wish to build a healthy culture. Our second dwarven state shall cast out the darkness and lead us to a brighter future. Not as an empire, but as a republic. A true enlightened state where dwarves like us will be at the forefront of this age! For a brighter tomorrow!"

"FOR A BRIGHTER TOMORROW!"

The feed ended at that point as Venerable Orthox had spoken enough.

The man felt lighter now that he had expressed his thoughts and shared his vision with the men that were willing to take part in this new adventure.

"Good job, Orthox." General Kebrinore complimented. "Your speech wasn't as professional as most, but you spoke from the heart, and that has touched our men. A brighter tomorrow indeed."

"I merely wish to prevent the darkness that has swept over our state to be kept at bay when we make our second attempt."

"True, true. We will need your leadership and vision in the times to come."

"Shouldn't you be speaking to some of our dwarven Masters in order to secure the ludicrous amount of MTA merits required to pass through the beyonder gate?"

"Ugh, don't get me started on that." The beardless general palmed his face. "We need their merits and funding, but they all want to take charge of our evacuation fleet. Each and everyone thinks they should become the next Ves Larkinson."

Venerable Orthox scowled. "Tch... That is enough of a reason to push back against this notion. Mech designers must never be in charge!"

*Chapter 3330: It Has Come*

"Your belly's grown bigger."

"I would hope so. Our baby daughter is getting more ready to pop out." Gloriana smiled as she and her husband rubbed her bulging belly. "I guess with all of the delays, our first child will have the privilege of being born in the Milky Way after all. She shall be our final gift to our home galaxy before we chase after a more ambitious tomorrow."

"Miaow."

Clixie climbed up on the bed and sniffed at Gloriana's body. The cat rubbed her head against the exposed belly, not that the pregnant woman noticed.

"We have stayed in Amswick way too long, Ves. When are we finally going to move?"

"It shouldn't be long, now. I'm just waiting for the final act to begin." He mysteriously said with a grin. "I'm impatient to leave for the Red Ocean as well, but you can't rush certain matters. For what it's worth, the extra delay has been good for us. Not only did we manage to make up for the personnel we lost, we also performed enough repairs to the Graveyard that she can serve as an adequate defensive ship once again."

"Mmmhmm. Her overall integrity is still a matter of concern, though. These makeshift repairs don't go deep enough. All of that heavy kinetic fire from the Slug Rangers has stressed and cracked many parts of her internal structure. Repairing these sections without access to complete drydock facilities will be a long and painful journey."

Ves shrugged as he shifted out of his bed. "The ship will hold. The Graveyard will be able to pass through the beyonder gate without falling apart at the other side. Vivian Tsai has assured me of that. We can slowly fix the remaining damage once we have reached the Red Ocean. A drydock is nice but not essential, especially once we have the Diligent Ovenbird in our hands."

Gloriana scrunched up her face. "Have you reconsidered renaming our upcoming capital fleet repair and construction vessel? I cannot for the life of me understand why anyone thinks it is a good idea to give a dignified capital ship a name that is more fitting for a party boat!"

"Hey, we all need some levity in our lives. It's just a label, honey. I don't want our clan to turn all stiff and serious all of the time. What matters more is that the Ovenbird can meet the needs of our fleet. It is the only capital ship that can fix other starships. I don't need to tell you how crucial that is in the Red Ocean."

One of the benefits of delaying their main journey was that the shipbuilders were able to apply additional upgrades and refinements to the two capital ships the Larkinson Clan had ordered. Both the Diligent Ovenbird and the Gorgoneion received expensive new modules that should hopefully make them much more useful in the times to come.

As the couple both went into their separate bathrooms to freshen up and ready themselves for the day, they met again to partake in their breakfast and talk about their various issues. Most of their discussion related to the Bulwark Project and the Chimera Project.

Both of them had progressed substantially, with the former only a week away from completion. Venerable Jannzi didn't have to wait much longer to receive her impressive expert mech!

"I want us to be in our best state once we refit and overhaul the Shield of Samar." Gloriana insisted. "You're too distracted with all of this dwarven stuff lately. I hope you wrap up this nonsense as soon as possible so we can finally get back to what we should really be doing. We're mech designers, not revolutionaries, you know."

Ves coughed. "You don't need to remind me. Everything I am doing is so that I can design better and more impressive mechs. I am not living out a power fantasy or anything!"

His wife rolled his eyes. "Well, please tell me when you finally have your fill of megalomania. Play time doesn't last forever."

"I'm not playing around! I'm engaged in serious business here! It's not easy propping up the clan."

"If ruling the clan is too hard for you, then you should try and delegate your responsibilities to someone competent... such as myself."

Yeah, that would go well with the clan.

"Uhm, I'm good. Thanks for the offer."

Once they finished their breakfast, Gloriana headed over to the design lab straight away as usual while Ves departed for his office.

"Miaow!" Clixie ran after him and brushed her body against his legs.

"Hey, there. You want to keep me company today?"

"Miaow~"

Ves picked up the furry cat and scratched her chin as she squinted her eyes in pleasure.

Clixie was a fine replacement for Lucky who had wandered off again. Ves even heard reports that Lucky snuck onto shuttles that brought him to other capital ships!

Oh well. Ves had plenty of pets these days.

Once he reached his office, he put Clixie on his desk while he started his morning duties. He quickly signed off on some proposals from the chief ministers while listening to Gavin's morning briefing.

As usual, his assistant was voicing concern over the expeditionary fleet's continuous delays and his continued obsession over the dwarves.

Ves brushed aside these concerns like usual. Few Larkinsons understood that Ves did not in fact obsess over the dwarves. The Vulcan Empire was an obstacle to him regardless of whether it was ruled by humans or dwarves.

Gavin soon made way to Minister Shederin, who had become a regular visitor as of late. The old and sophisticated man sat on a familiar chair with a pleased expression on his face.

"You look happy." Ves pointed out.

"I do. I have received explosive news from my sources since yesterday evening. I did not rush to inform you at first since this could still be an overblown rumor. I waited for other contacts to corroborate this development."

"Well, let it out then. What happened?"

"The Mech Trade Association has washed its hands of the Vulcan Empire. Though nothing has changed on the surface, the MTA will no longer take any special measures to protect the autonomy and independence of the dwarven state. The Vulcanites have lost their shield!"

"Truly?!" Ves leaned forward as he squished Clixie's back with his hand. "They're fair game now?"

"I am 90 percent certain that is the case, sir. I am not the only one who believes the game has changed. I have been paying attention to the troop movements of the Empire of the Lost along with other states that are situated within reach of the Vulcan Empire.

Since this morning, they have abruptly transferred more military assets to the border areas. They have even pulled away mech regiments that were originally assigned to defend strategic star systems such as Amswick."

The mech militaries of all of these states must have moved more assets to the borders that the public had yet to know about. What was clear was that the Lost and other local humans had reason to drop their fear of the Vulcanites now that the latter ostensibly lost the support of the only patron that had allowed them to live in safety all this time!

Wheels began to spin in Ves' mind. He knew that the coming days would become a lot more exciting. The time of sitting around and waiting would soon be over.

"How have the Vulcanites reacted to this development?"

"Not much." The old man chuckled. "Their government has never advertised their secret agreements with the MTA. It won't do to inform the human-hating Vulcanites that they have been relying on the shelter of one of the most powerful human-centric organizations for all of these decades. The dwarves are too proud and cannot stand losing face in such a manner. One of the central myths of their people is that dwarvenkind is better than the rest of humanity. Any notion that dwarves must beg to retain the favor of the tall folk is so alien to the Vulcanites that it won't be accepted even if it is true!"

"They'll probably dismiss it as 'fake news' or something." Ves scoffed as he mimed quotation marks with his fingers.

"In my long career in public service, I have witnessed over and over again that there are a surprising amount of people who can't admit the truth even if it is staring them right in the face. Anyone who cries out 'fake news' is simply unable or unwilling to accept reality. Sometimes it is for a selfish reason. Other times it is an expression of ignorance. Those are the worst in my opinion. Indoctrination has a way of making people think that something wrong is right and vice versa. The so-called Statue War is the most recent example of how it can be abused."

The Vulcan Empire was a powerful case that illustrated the faults of indoctrination.

If the Vulcanites were taught to think for themselves, they wouldn't have easily fallen for the statues made by Ves. Critical thinking was already in short supply in religious states, but the Vulcan Empire was one of the worst that he had ever seen!

If the Vulcanites weren't taught to blindly embrace their faith, they wouldn't have gotten into a rat race where false prophets were able to hijack a religious movement that could have given the dwarves the pride and confidence they needed to succeed in human space.



If the Vulcanites didn't hate the tall folk so much, they might be more willing to accept the favor and good will of other humans. The central government shouldn't feel pressured to keep its complicated relationship with the MTA a secret. More dwarves would have returned to sanity if they knew early on how much they relied on the Association's guarantee to maintain their prosperity!

"We've reached the tipping point." Ves whispered.

His words rang true as further news arrived later that day.

"WAR! WAR HAS COME!"

Everyone in the expeditionary fleet stopped what they were doing and checked the news.

The local media had exploded!

"...Five second-rate states have jointly published a declaration of war against the Vulcan Empire! Their attack and invasion fleets are already crossing the border into the Smiling Samuel Star Sector as we speak. More reservists are being called for service and the allied states will begin a comprehensive recruitment campaign in order to muster the troops that are not only needed to take back the Smiling Samuel Star Sector, but to occupy it so that we can rebuild our human homes in our old star systems!"

"...Currently, the Empire of the Lost, the Moseley Confederate, the Consolidated Kingdom of Namais, the Potsdam Republic and the Cameron Collective have all agreed to act in coordination and unify their strategic outlook for their joint invasion into the Vulcan Empire. We have even received information that we have yet to corroborate that the five allied states have already carved out the provinces of the dwarven state for themselves!"

"...Few Vulcan military units show signs of halting their attack on their fellow dwarves. This will likely change in the coming days, but the Statue War has already inflicted considerable damage to the Vulcan Empire's war readiness. Their defenses are in disarray, their mech armies are displaced and their infrastructure is partially on fire. Even if all of the dwarves stop their infighting right this moment, they can only fight the five allied states to a standstill at best. If more human states join the anti-dwarf alliance, which will certainly happen, most military analysts predict that the Vulcan Empire will succumb from the weight of an all-encompassing human offensive!"

The more Ves read and watched the news, the more he grinned. All of these stories were music to his ears!

"Hahahahaha!" Ves raised his head and laughed. "It has finally happened! I knew the Empire of the Lost and the other human states couldn't resist the temptation. The

Vulcan Empire is too juicy to ignore. Just as well. Their invasion will pave the way for my reentry into the Smiling Samuel Star Sector!"

This was what he had set out to do from the start! The entire Vulcan Empire had to be removed so that Ves could finally retrieve his damned Timpala Steel!