

Mech 3331

Chapter 3331: Land Grab

The ambitious plan to undermine the Vulcan Empire had succeeded!

Ves, Minister Shederin and Calabast had each contributed their own expertise to push the dwarven state into the abyss.

The two advisors recognized that while the Vulcan Empire was strong on the surface, its interior had several vulnerable cracks.

Shederin keenly recognized that the Vulcanites were too immature as a people and that their state was not as well-run as it should. Religion was the greatest fault line of the Vulcan Empire and it was the only element that could make its citizens forget about their hatred against the tall folk for a time!

Calabast grasped the finer psychology of the extremist dwarves and knew what was needed to push them into militancy. She had gone on missions before where she was tasked with triggering groups of people to perform actions they would otherwise refrain from doing by finding the right handle to push them into action.

Of course, she wasn't the only professional who recognized that the religious nutjobs among the Vulcanites could become their own worst enemies. There were plenty of dwarves who were quite aware of this fault line and their animosity towards the tall folk meant that they were not that easily fooled by false flag attacks and other mundane tricks.

This was where Ves came in. Unlike other people, he possessed the unique capability to arouse the faith of the Vulcanites. Though no one knew why Ves was so familiar with Vulcan, the glow he created recently worked so disturbingly well on the citizens of the dwarven state that both of his advisors were surprised that the unwitting victims descended into civil war so quickly!

Ves didn't expect the dwarves to get hoodwinked at such an enormous degree. After all, any decent mech designer could establish a clear connection between the mysterious statues of Vulcan and Ves' design philosophy.

It appeared that Shederin's judgement that stupid people tended to double down when they were proven wrong was correct. His expertise, experience and ability to read other people were invaluable to the Larkinson Clan. Without his contribution, Ves would have never been able to push the Vulcan Empire to the brink!

What was even more impressive about Shederin was that he never counted upon the civil war to single-handedly take down the dwarven state.

No matter how badly the dwarves beat each other up, as long as the Mech Trade Association maintained a considerable interest in keeping a strong dwarven state intact, it would never allow human states such as the Empire of the Lost to invade the Smiling Samuel Star Sector.

In fact, there was even a chance that the MTA would have stepped in to straighten the Vulcan Empire up! Whether they acted covertly or overtly, there was little that Ves or anyone else could do to stop the mechers from rescuing the dwarves from their own troubles.

This was why drawing out the worst impulses of the Vulcanites was such a brilliant approach.

The sectarian strife that had broken out between the two sides was not a regular civil war. It was not a struggle between rich and poor or oppressed and oppressors.

Instead, the cause of all of the bloodshed was due to a difference in opinion on whether Vulcan was a dwarf or human!

Even though there was a host of beliefs and attitudes associated with each interpretation, the fact that the dwarves were killing each other on a mass scale for a reason as banal as disagreeing whether their god was tall or short looked ridiculous!

Shederin predicted that as the Vulcanites continued to show more ugly behavior, the MTA's patience for these people would quickly wear thin.

"The mechers consider themselves to be the most enlightened group of people in the galaxy." The Purnesser mentioned to Ves. "They place themselves above the so-called space peasants and rule human space from an ivory tower. Even if they treat us like cattle, they still have certain expectations for their chattel. If the pigs they rear are too violent, dirty and unappetizing, it is not worth it to keep them anymore."

This was the crux of their plan to collapse the Vulcan Empire. The behavior of so many dwarven citizens was so abhorrent and antithetical to the ideals of the Mech Trade Association that it had generated an enormous amount of disgust!

The advantages of allowing the dwarves to keep an entire star sector for themselves no longer justified the cost of tolerating all of the excesses of the Vulcan Empire!

A disaster like this would have never happened if the Vulcanites maintained a closer and more intimate relationship with the MTA, but obviously this was not the case.

In the end, the dwarves not only bit the hand that fed them, but also acted so abhorrently afterwards that they showed no redeeming factors!

It would have been surprising if the MTA did not opt to wash its hands from this quarrelsome group of ignorant dwarves.

Once the MTA withdrew their guarantee, the Vulcan Empire was fair game to the surrounding human states!

After so many decades of living alongside a xenophobic dwarven state that was filled with people who believed that the tall folk were the problem of all of their ills, it shouldn't be a surprise that the Vulcan Empire's neighbors did not like to live alongside the Vulcanites.

Now that there was a golden opportunity to get rid of the dwarven cancer, the human states instantly moved into action!

What surprised Ves a lot was that the temporary alliance of human states moved in so quickly. He would have thought that the onlooking humans would have been content to sit back and relax while the dwarves kept expending their manpower and using up their war-making potential on each other.

"Time is of the essence." Shederin illuminated Ves. "The more time passes by, the greater the chance that a new variable will come and change the equation. For example, the two dwarven factions might wake up to the fact that they are just weakening each other so that the tall folk outside could take over Smiling Samuel at a bargain. A powerful external state or organization might come and back the Vulcan Empire. The MTA might change its mind. To the humans, this is the first time that the Vulcan Empire is vulnerable to attack. Anything can happen that could close this window of opportunity. The best way to prevent these changes from occurring is to move quickly and decisively."

"I see. It still sounds like a big gamble, though."

"Second-rate states aren't weak, patriarch. Each of them has built up a formidable military machine. While it is true that there is still a gap between the might of a regular second-rate state and one that has gained complete control over a star sector, the Vulcanites have provoked too many enemies and cannot defend against concerted attacks from each direction. If the dwarven war machine was still in peak condition, then the defenders might be able to stall the invading human forces. As it is..."

Ves slowly smirked. "The dwarves drew too many mech armies from the border in order to fight each other. Their military deployments are all messed up and completely in the wrong position to resist external invasions."

Minister Shederin nodded. "Correct. Part of the reason why the Lost and the other invading humans launched their invasion so quickly is because they are afraid that the dwarves will eventually wake up to the fact that they have failed to guard their front doors and transfer their mech armies back to their border strongholds. Once the fortified

star systems at the edge of Smiling Samuel have returned to full strength, it is much harder and costlier to take them down."

Capturing these fortified star systems was one of the most essential steps to launching a successful invasion!

Ves was reminded of the Komodo War where the Hexers initially managed to overrun the Friday Coalition's Crestfallen Stars.

Though it was easy enough to bypass them in space navigation, leaving these military fortresses and bases intact left the invasion troops vulnerable to getting cut off or ambushed from multiple directions!

Only by taking them away from the enemy would an invasion force truly be able to expand into the interior of enemy space.

Since it was too costly to fully fortify every region of space, most states only fortified their key strategic nodes as well as the star systems at the border. As long as any attackers managed to overtake the latter, at least half of the most difficult steps of conquering an enemy state were in the bag!

Ves fully realized how much of an advantage the human alliance had gained.

"It seems these human states are highly confident in their ability to fight the Vulcan Empire's armed forces head-on." He noted.

"That is certainly the case. The five states that have made a move so far are only the first-movers. They have taken a larger risk in order to capture the most desirable provinces first and expand their claims. The other states in the region that have adopted a wait-and-see attitude will not stand by for long. Once this second batch joins in, the Vulcan Empire simply cannot resist the flood of foreign troops."

The civil war along with the initial human invasion already stripped away the Vulcan Empire's illusion of strength. For a long time, the Empire of the Lost along with other neighboring human states lived under constant fear of the powerful dwarven state.

Yet with so many displays of weaknesses, it was impossible for the humans to keep fearing the dwarves!

Once they broke their psychological barrier, the human rulers would definitely make a move in order to project strength!

As a result, a huge stampede took place where many different human forces invaded a star sector that they previously regarded as taboo.

In the beginning, only the invasion troops of the original alliance moved in. Afterwards, more human states joined the party and dispatched their own troops on short notice.

Even though all of these human powers fought on the same side, they also treated each other as competitors.

"Faster! Faster! Faster! We need to grab as many wealthy provinces as possible! Don't let the stinking Moseleys take away the territory that rightfully belongs the Lost!"

"Sir, we can't sustain the pace of our invasion! Our troops are running thin and our supplies are wearing thin."

"Then concentrate our forces and take over the enemy's key star systems. As long as we hold the crown jewels in our hands, none of our rivals can take them away anymore."

"We'll overextend ourselves if we penetrate too deeply into enemy territory. Without cleaning up the periphery, the dwarves can still encircle and cut off our forward troops."

"Then tell headquarters to put the private sector to work! Those mercenaries back home are too weak to assault the main systems, but they're just right to take over the lesser and more rural star systems."

"Many mercenaries are undisciplined and unreliable. Their presence in Smiling Samuel will cause major disruptions in the war theater. Is it wise to invite them, sir?"

"Just do it! As long as we give enough rewards, the unruly mercenary corps can still be harnessed. With their help, we will not only be able to grab more land, but also divert dwarven attention away from our main forces. As long as we hold more territory in the end, everything is worth it! Now let's move before our rivals come up with the same idea!"

Once the Empire of the Lost started contracting mercenary organizations on a large scale, the other states quickly followed suit.

Everyone seemed to smell a gold rush in the Vulcan Empire. While the states were mainly preoccupied with conquering territory, the various private sector forces were in it for a different reason.

"Loot! Loot all of these wealthy dwarven planets! Grab as much booty as you can, boys, because a chance like this doesn't come twice!"

A plundering season had begun as a multitude of human mercenary corps descended upon the Vulcan Empire like a school of piranhas. With the human mech armies occupying the attention of most dwarven military units, the Vulcanites did not have

many forces left at their disposal that could resist the raids conducted by the mercenary fleets!

It was under these increasingly more chaotic circumstances that the expeditionary fleet nonchalantly entered the Vulcan Empire once again.

This time, the Golden Skull Alliance was far from the only human force that had entered dwarven territory. It attracted considerably less attention this time, which was exactly what Ves wanted!

Chapter 3332: Ves the Plague Carrier

The Larkinsons, Glory Seekers and Crossers entered the territory of their enemy once again.

Not many of them thought this was a good idea. They all retained bad memories of their first entry into the Vulcan Empire.

However, the circumstances were different this time.

The expeditionary fleet might not have been able to get back up to its previous strength, but the mercenaries contracted by the Larkinson Clan made up for a lot. With at least ten-thousand extra protectors by its side, the Golden Skull Alliance became even less appealing as a target!

"You're moving in too soon, Ves." Chief Minister Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson said to Ves over the comm.

"Relax. The Vulcanites have greater threats to contend with than us." Ves replied to the projection. "Even if they have finally smarted up and stopped their ridiculous civil war, there are way too many human invaders for them to spare any attention to us. We'll be avoiding all of the major hotspots where most of the dwarven troops are concentrated."

"What if there are Vulcanites that will stop at nothing to take revenge on us? We have attracted a lot of heat if you didn't know that already."

"We're spending a lot more effort scouting the way ahead. Also, we're a lot more on guard against the dwarves this time. The Black Cats are constantly monitoring different indicators to see whether there are any dwarven forces going after our fleet."

"All of that sounds nice, but I have heard nothing that makes me confident that our safety is guaranteed. You are relying on too many assumptions about the dwarves that we won't end up well if any of them turn out to be wrong. That is also why we almost met our end last time."

Ves grimaced. Raymond indeed made a good point. They had been too overconfident and did not assume that the dwarves would be crazy enough to attack the expeditionary fleet despite obtaining a special permit.

"Back then, we did not fully account for the internal dynamics of the Vulcan Empire. We know a lot more about the dwarves now that we're entering their territory for the second time. I think we can trust our intelligence organization to account for all of the ways the dwarves might plot against us, assuming they can even spare the attention."

That was still highly questionable. All of the core star systems held by the dwarves were under threat! The Vulcanites could not afford to lose too many of them and had decisively concentrated most of their mech forces to these key nodes.

Under these circumstances, it was stupid to withdraw at least four mech divisions to go after the Golden Skull Alliance and its mercenary escorts! Even if the Vulcan Empire had a lot more forces at its disposal, its military forces had to cover a lot of important star systems. Removing 40,000 from the defensive line might lead to an early collapse and loss of a strategic location!

Even though the war situation looked awful to the Vulcanites, the stubborn dwarves did not intend to lie down and let the human invaders walk all over their stocky bodies. As long as they withdrew their forces from their outlying provinces and concentrated their defenses in the center around the Uriburn Province, they could still hold out for a moderate amount of time!

As long as they bought enough time and forced the human invaders to occupy a large amount of dwarven territory, the invasion would inevitably slow down.

It was not easy to hold all of those conquered dwarven territories! The dwarven residents of all of the conquered planets did not like their new human overlords and did not hesitate to take up arms and mechs to form local resistance movements!

The only way to clean up these troublesome planets was to wipe out all of the dwarves who lived there, but no one dared to do so. Not only did the MTA take a dim view on war crimes, butchering Vulcanites wholesale was extremely bad optics.

It was one thing to take down the Vulcan Empire. It was another thing for humans to wipe out every dwarf in the Fermi Star Cluster! No matter how much the local humans hated their dwarven neighbors, they still had to make sure their conduct conformed with the galactic norm.

In any case, there were plenty of ways to make the dwarven problem disappear after the main invasion was done. Just like how the Vulcanites slowly displaced the human population when they took over Smiling Samuel, the human invaders finally had the opportunity to turn the tables!

Of course, none of the aftermath had anything to do with Ves. He just opened up the Vulcan Empire for his own purposes. Just as the Empire of the Lost and all of the other human states took advantage of his deeds, Ves also exploited their invasion to attract all of the attention of the dwarves away from him and his fleet.

Due to this, the relationship between the expeditionary fleet and the other human forces were a bit complicated.

For example, no one wanted to get close to the supposed masterminds of the Vulcan Empire's fall from grace.

Whenever the Golden Skull Alliance encountered another ship or fleet, the latter always tried to keep its distance!

It was as if those other human forces were afraid of causing misunderstandings and attracting the ire of the Larkinson Clan and its increasingly infamous patriarch. Not even well-equipped military fleets wished to remain in the presence of the foreigners that had upended the entire geopolitical situation of the Fermi Star Cluster.

"Why are they avoiding us so much?"

"Isn't it obvious? The states that have dispatched these troops are afraid of setting you off. They don't want to become the next Vulcan Empire!"

That was a ridiculous reaction. Ves didn't think he was that scary.

Of course, the leaders of the Ferril Province also held this sentiment and paid for it. With the Vulcan Empire as the grand prize, the leaders of the various human states did not want to take any risks. They had all instructed their own troops to avoid the Golden Skull Alliance like the plague.

Sooner or later, Ves would leave this star cluster and continue his journey to the Red Ocean. The people of the Fermi Star Cluster couldn't wait for him to finish his business and send him off! The sooner this walking disaster left their neighborhood, the better!

Ves didn't mind being treated as a plague carrier. He didn't want to provoke any further trouble either and happily watched as his fleet traversed deeper into the wartorn interior of the Vulcan Empire.

Much of the attention of the human invasion forces was placed on the rich and wealthy second-rate provinces of the dwarven state. On their part, the Vulcanites also concentrated their defenses at their superior territories.

This gave the expeditionary fleet a peaceful and mostly quiet ride to the Paramount Province.

In historical terms, the site of the former Paramount Kingdom carried a lot of weight. It was the birthplace of the dwarven revolution and the place where Vulcan initially revealed himself to the dwarves.

However, neither side spared any attention to it. The human second-rate states didn't even bother to conquer the impoverished third-class provinces. The dwarves had no choice but to make the practical decision to defend their critical territories rather than their worthless ones.

As a consequence, the expeditionary fleet did not encounter any friction by explicitly tracing a route through the neglected provinces.

Since Ves was in a hurry, his fleet did not waste time on following a difficult, winding route. Instead, it cut forward at a brisk pace, disregarding any local presences along the way.

The local garrisons and defense fleets posed no threat to the Golden Skull Alliance. The tech difference was too big and the limited number of second-class mechs they used to field had all been transferred over to the core provinces.

"Huh. They're not even putting up a token resistance." Ves contemptuously said.

The Vulcan Empire was on fire right now, so how could the third-raters entertain any thoughts of stopping the expeditionary fleet? None of their forces would even be able to survive getting close as the Amaranto could easily shoot down their ships!

What the dwarves were preoccupied with instead was evacuating from their homes. It appeared that a lot of Vulcanites no longer possessed any confidence that dwarven superiority would allow them to vanquish the human invaders.

Starship after starship took in a flood of refugees and goods. Only a fraction of the population would be able to escape from the scary tall folk this way but it couldn't be helped.

Ves hadn't seen an evacuation of this magnitude since the Sand War. All kinds of dire and desperate scenes occurred throughout the Smiling Samuel Star Sector.

Couples got separated. Wealthy businessmen had to abandon much of their wealth. Anarchy reigned in the streets as law and order had collapsed. So many tragedies took place in dwarven space that the Larkinsons felt increasingly more guilty for triggering all of this chaos.

The main culprit responsible for making their lives hell remained unmoved, mostly.

Was he guilty for making the lives of so many dwarves miserable? Certainly. Did it matter to him? Nope.

He snorted. "Back when the dwarves conquered Smiling Samuel, they must have driven a huge amount of humans to death or desperation. I'm just giving them a taste of their own medicine, that's all. The Vulcanites are anything but innocent."

It was too bad that not everyone in the clan saw it that way. Venerable Jannzi was just the loudest voice that expressed disapproval at all of the suffering that Ves had wrought.

Even so, the latest course of events only reinforced his power. A lot of Larkinsons admired what he had done and were glad that he managed to get payback on the Vulcanites for their attack.

"I still don't understand you, Ves." Ketis spoke as she worked with him to refine the Chimera Project's latest iteration. "I'm no angel, but even I wouldn't go as far as collapsing an entire state and doom all of its citizens, many of whom don't have anything to do with us. Couldn't you have found another solution to get what you want? Those Pershams still seemed friendly at the time. You could have just hired them to fetch whatever it is you're looking for. If not, there are many other groups that are willing to do stuff for payment."

Ves shook his head. "That's not a viable solution. I don't want any dwarf getting their hands on my objective. This is something I have to do myself."

"You make it sound as if you're willing to detonate a nuclear bomb if that is what it takes for you to get your way!"

He directed a pointed stare at her. "Don't be silly. I'm not that crazy. The MTA would be on me in a second. I am a proper, law-abiding mech designer. I never engage in acts that would implicate me! That's not logical behavior!"

Ketis swept her arm around her. "And you think riling up the dwarven crazies isn't damaging enough? The scheme you've pulled off is far more destructive than any nuclear bomb!"

"Hehehe." Ves deviously checked. "You're completely correct, and that's the beauty of it. We're mech designers, Ketis. Our main job is to spend the least amount of resources to produce the greatest possible effect."

"I don't think the effort you put in is anything less than deploying a weapon of mass destruction!"

"Don't be silly. I made sure not to do anything that would trip over the MTA's taboos. My consciousness is completely clean. What those dwarven fanatics chose to do after receiving their gifts has nothing to do with me. They chose to give in to their violent impulses on their own accord."

"You're responsible for more deaths than almost any other human in the galaxy!"

"You're being silly again, Ketis. We're mech designers." Ves emphasized. "We make products that are used to kill people every day. We're not culpable for the acts committed by our customers who use our products."

Was this truly the case? Ketis wasn't sure.

Chapter 3333: Guilty People

Ketis was just one of many Larkinsons who expressed their misgivings at what had happened.

Several more people voiced their doubts and concerns to Ves. From Gavin to Raymond, all of them regarded him with a bit more fear rather than respect.

The change in attitude grew worse as the expeditionary fleet kept travelling through Vulcanite space. It was one thing to hear about the tragedies from afar. It was another thing to be in the same star system where frantic evacuations took place and where tragic circumstances happened at an unimaginable scale.

It led to a lot of difficult discussions in the Larkinson Clan. Few clansmen thought they should engage in this kind of business in the first place.

"We are a clan of soldiers and warriors. I'm fine with killing the dwarves across the battlefield, but destroying them in such an insidious way just seems wrong."

"We can't beat every opponent in a straightforward battle. The Vulcan Empire is so strong that we couldn't have defeated it any other way."

"Should we have even bothered with attacking them like this, though?"

"Don't you remember what happened a few months ago? The dwarves tried to kill us all! They don't get to play innocent now that they're on the receiving end of an attack."

All of this discussion caused Ves to fall into a contemplative mood. Though he still stuck to his stance that he shouldn't feel guilty about anything, he was slowly starting to consider whether he might have gone too far this time.

"Well, at least we've managed to reach the Paramount Province without encountering any hindrances this time. That is enough of a justification."

"The Paramount Province was one of the quieter territories of the Vulcan Empire. The war had yet to reach this far on a massive scale."

Just like elsewhere, the local dwarven forces were more interested in evacuating from their homes than to fight a futile battle against the human invaders.

Slowly but surely, the expeditionary fleet slowly reached the quiet and uninhabited star system where Ves had stashed his batch of Timpala Steel during his last Mastery experience.

"Everything I've done is for this. It better be worth it." He muttered under his breath.

His intuition told him that Timpala Steel was definitely a remarkable substance even for something as amazing as the Mech Designer System.

Ves even thought that since the System was actually the Metal Scroll of legend, feeding it a metal exotic of extremely high worth and potency should definitely result in a huge upgrade!

Though he consciously tried to rely on the System as little as possible these days, it was undeniable that they shared a symbiotic relationship. The stronger it became, the more benefits Ves received!

As someone who was hungry for improvement, he did not mind leaning on the System if it offered amazing options that he couldn't get anywhere else. The Mastery and Superpublish opportunities it provided to Ves were already invaluable enough in itself. Perhaps upgrading it with Timpala Steel would unlock another powerful feature that could enable Ves to expand his mech designer competences!

His breathing grew heavier when he began to anticipate all of the rewards he might gain from completing his first Supply Mission. The System better not skimp out this time!

During their journey through the first territory that the original dwarven rebels had taken over, the expeditionary fleet encountered an acquaintance.

The scouts dispatched by the mercenary escorts had already given Ves advance warning about the familiar presence, so he wasn't caught off guard.

He had mixed feelings about the only dwarves who took the initiative to intercept the expeditionary fleet. Whereas many dwarves and humans avoided him and his forces like the plague, the people who clearly wanted to meet with him did not have as much fear.

The Pershams already befriended him before hostilities broke out. They were the few friendly and amiable Vulcanites that the Larkinsons had met who did not hold any hostile attitudes towards the tall folk.

The Dented Coin was situated light-hours away from the emergence point of the expeditionary fleet. She had made no attempts to close in and rendez-vous with the powerful human visitors.

Seeing that the Pershams clearly sought him out, Ves couldn't hold back his curiosity. He accepted a call over the galactic net.

A projection of Director Olivier Persham appeared in front of Ves. The dwarf looked much more aged, tired and stressed, for understandable reasons.

"You're a hard man to reach, Patriarch Larkinson." The middle-aged dwarf spoke with his deep voice. "I've been trying to call you for months, but you've never picked up until now. Do you really think so little of us dwarves?"

Ves inwardly sighed. Faced with one of the victims of his actions, he felt his conscience acting up again. He tried to suppress this unwelcome and unproductive impulse as best as possible.

"I've been busy, as you can clearly tell. Also, I no longer require your services. As you can see, we have no problems with navigating through Vulcanite territory."

His cold tone did not make Olivier happy. The head of the Persham Chamber of Commerce looked disappointed.

A few seconds passed in silence before the dwarf spoke up again.

"Why have you done this, patriarch? I don't understand. The Ferril Province is certainly guilty for trying to kill you, but there are many dwarves who are still decent! Why must you implicate them as well? They don't deserve to lose their lives and livelihoods! My friends and family in the Paramount Province are all crying because their worlds have collapsed. They have never known any homes aside from the planets they live in. Now, they are all scrambling to get aboard the few ships that can take them away from the humans who will never treat them well."

Ves let out an annoyed grunt. "Don't try to pretend your people are squeaky clean. One of the reasons why your fellow dwarves aren't comfortable with human occupation is because of how poorly you treated the original occupants of all of these star systems! The empire you built sits on a foundation that consists of an endless amount of human bones!"

"That's because we had little other choice at the time! The Vulcanites who rose up needed to keep beating and conquering the humans around us. If we kept giving them room to breathe, they would have tried to attack us and rob our people of the space we needed to live decent lives. We were under constant existential threat unless we cleared the entire star sector of humans that could threaten a dwarven state!"

Ves probably figured that this was true. The dwarves already attracted a lot of notoriety from the start. Sooner or later, their human neighbors would have acted in order to contain or neutralize the new threat.

History went in the other direction, though. Due to numerous happenstances and improbable circumstances, the Vulcanites managed to beat all of the human states in Smiling Samuel!

"There is little point in talking about morality at this point." Ves said with a tired voice. "What is done is done. I do not regret my decisions. While I do not enjoy the ordeals that the average citizens of your empire are going through, the events leading to this collapse did not start from me. Your own people had already laid the seeds from the beginning."

Director Olivier Persham came into more contact with foreigners and the outside galaxy than other dwarves. He possessed enough perspective to know what Ves was talking about.

While the internal propaganda of the Vulcan Empire always painted the dwarves in the right, those who were more aware of the complete history knew that the Vulcanites were not exactly innocent.

Even in modern times, the dwarves frequently rattled their sabers and expressed an open intention to defeat all of their neighboring human states!

Was it any surprise that the latter rightfully considered the Vulcan Empire to be an existential threat that had to be eliminated as soon as possible as long as there was a chance?

Another silence fell as Director Olivier did not manage to receive any explanation that could satisfy him or give him closure.

The dwarf slowly clutched his greying beard. "Do you have something against us dwarves, patriarch? Did we do something to you that caused you to seek our downfall?"

"Nothing like that." Ves shook his head. "You're just humans but shorter to me. It's everyone else who keeps acting as if dwarves like you are a separate species. You Vulcanites are the worst in this regard. You not only try to separate your identity from the rest of humanity, but also claim to be superior to us. A few of your people even think that's enough of a justification to go on a crusade against the 'tall folk'. If you dwarves didn't encourage such a close-minded attitude, perhaps you would have been able to prevent your own collapse."

Technically speaking, Ves did set the Vulcanites up on this path during his last Mastery experience. His carelessness and his casual behavior back then not only set up the Vulcanites for success, but also precipitated its fall.

This was why he sometimes considered the citizens of the Vulcan Empire to be his children, but only rarely.

Seeing that this conversation wasn't accomplishing much, Director Olivier moved on to the last point he wanted to address.

"I have one final question to ask before I take my family out of this star sector. Are you... Vulcan?"

Ves let out a deep breath. He had a feeling his former dwarven friend would ask this contentious question.

"Do I look like Vulcan?" He asked back as he wasn't comfortable with supplying a direct answer.

"I can't say." Olivier looked pained. "I have worshipped Vulcan longer than you have lived. My daughter, my family and all of the dwarves from my home planet have given their unquestionable devotion to the god that has helped to liberate our people. We worship the true Vulcan. It's just... when I equate the Vulcan described by the priests and portrayed in our scriptures to a devil like you, I don't know whether I can still maintain my beliefs."

"You're probably not the first Vulcanite who is undergoing a crisis of faith at the moment. Your people are suffering from an unprecedented disaster and Vulcan hasn't lifted a hand to help you out." Ves mildly said.

"Maybe... it is because we spurned our god." Olivier lowered his eyes. "It would explain much, I think. We invited his wrath due to our presumptuous actions and now we're suffering the consequences of that. We were too arrogant and self-righteous to know right from wrong. It is no wonder our god has exacted his punishment on our people."

"Wow, Olivier. Your god sounds like a cruel and petty man. He must be enormously bored and prideful to stomp the sandcastle that he helped erect."

The dwarf shrugged. "Maybe so. I think I have a better idea of what our god is truly like now. The kind, caring and benevolent Vulcan that we have always kept in our hearts might not have existed in the first place. We were fed a false image that has led us on the wrong track. It is a pity that our realization came late. Vulcan... won't save us. He will never save us. Our state is doomed. The most I can do is to take away the few dwarves my ships can carry and try to eke out a life elsewhere."

"You should try out the spaceborn life by setting up a space caravan." Ves sincerely suggested. "Many states won't welcome you dwarves, so why not turn your starships into your new homes? Sure, this kind of life is hard to adapt at first, but there are many benefits that you sorely need. At the very least, your existence won't make any human

state feel threatened. I think this is the best way for you and your family to keep on living."

This proposal did not sit well with Olivier.

"Our homeland means more to us than you can ever think. It is too hard for us to let go of our existing homes. Still... we have little choice at the moment. We will take your suggestion under advisement. Goodbye, Patriarch Larkinson. I hope you will recognize the magnitude of what you have done one day."

The conversation ended and the Dented Coin eventually made its way out of the star system... Ves had the feeling that Olivier was probably the last amiable dwarf he would speak to for a long time.

Chapter 3334: Trion Enze Revisited

A long time ago, a hijacked ore transport ship called the TR-3851 passed through an unremarkable red dwarf star system.

The stopover was situated relatively close to the Desala System where the legendary rebellion initially broke out. The ship did not stay too long here. After a bit of preparation and cleanup, he programmed the navigation system to take the vessel to the nearest substantial MTA outpost.

Despite the betrayal of Gion Greybeard and his confidants, Ves kept his promise to the Desala Resistance Movement. He did not laid the sins of the ringleaders on the feet of the rest of the escaped dwarven slaves from the mining planet.

Perhaps he should have sent his conscience on vacation that time. If Ves did not enable the excited dwarven rebels to fulfill their wish, they wouldn't have gone on to spark a storm that completely swept the Smiling Samuel Star Sector and turned it into a bastion of dwarven supremacy!

If the old Paramount Kingdom was still alive, Ves was certain he could have waltzed to the Trion Enze System, pick up his special package, and leave with no one paying any special attention to one of countless human fleets passing through the star sector!

In hindsight, all of the complications he encountered ever since he stepped foot in Smiling Samuel could have been avoided!

"The Vulcan Empire is ultimately an indirect creation of mine." He whispered to himself. "I guess it is rather poetic that it shall also end at my hands."

Now that he had finally reached his destination, his mood became more heavy and subdued. With the Vulcan Empire collapsing under the weight of its own flaws, Ves continued to think back on his past actions and their consequences.

This was hardly the only case where he flapped his wings like a butterfly that eventually altered the course of history and led to major changes.

Releasing Sigmund, supplying living mechs to the Hex Army, killing a powerful cadre of the Five Scrolls Compact, enabling the rise of the Vulcan Empire, the list went on and on. Ves was pretty sure that no other Journeyman in the galaxy had triggered so many epochal events in their lifetimes!

Yet despite all of the influence he exerted on human society, Ves did not consider himself to be anything more than a mech designer trying to find his way forward. It wasn't his fault that obstacles constantly entered his path and forced him to employ extreme measures to go forward.

This was also one of the reasons why he felt compelled to take a hard stance on the Vulcan Empire.

Only by creating enough deterrence would people stop getting in his way. Ves needed to create an image where anyone who wanted to plot against him had to think twice whether they could bear the consequences of doing so! Since his previous acts failed to achieve the desired effect, he simply had to dial up his punishment and hope that would be enough to make people afraid!

Considering the reactions of all of the third parties the expeditionary fleet met along the way, Ves knew he had achieved his purpose this time.

"I hope a portion of this reputation sticks once I reach the Red Ocean, because it will be a lot harder for me and my clan to throw our weight around in that shark tank."

This was his greater goal. Despite his public denials, Ves was certain that his involvement in the Vulcan Empire's collapse would become a part of his public record and his personal history.

The people in the Fermi Star Cluster who witnessed the Vulcan Empire falter and collapse in real-time knew exactly how horrible Ves could be, but the same could not be said for all of the pioneers and power players in the Red Ocean.

Ves knew that he needed to stand out from the crowd and avoid being seen as a punching bag that could easily be bullied in the cutthroat new frontier. The notoriety he acquired by masterminding the end of a powerful second-rate state would continue to form a powerful impression even to people who originated from the more prosperous parts of the Milky Way!

All in all, despite all of the setbacks he suffered, he actually made plenty of gains. The pressure generated by conflict always brought out his potential and enabled him to develop powerful new solutions that would all be useful in the long run.

Whether it was developing a design spirit incarnation based around craftsmanship to discovering one of the most promising hidden properties of masterwork mechs, Ves was certain that he and his clan made enough gains to increase their chances of survival once they reached the Red Ocean.

"After all, the enemies over there are much more powerful than the Vulcanites. They won't give us a second chance when they launch an attack." He murmured.

As he continued to contemplate his gains from this adventure, he received a call from General Verle.

"What are your orders, sir?"

"Oh." Ves woke up. "We've arrived at the target system. Please instruct the fleet to head to the inner asteroid belt. I'll provide further instructions when we reach this place."

General Verle looked surprised. He didn't expect that Ves would go through all of that trouble to enter the Vulcan Empire just to reach a small and inconsequential red dwarf system!

However, he knew that it was not his place to ask for clarification, especially on a remote channel.

"Very well, sir. Do you require the Andrenidae to deploy her mining mechs to mine the asteroids?" He asked. "During the past months, our clan has slowly filled out her crew complement. She is almost at optimal capacity and can perform most simple mining operations."

Ves initially wanted to say no, but he changed his mind. The buzzing activity might help with disguising his true purpose.

"Do that, please. I know this asteroid belt probably doesn't contain any precious minerals, but it will be good to give the fresh crew a bit of practice."

It took time to reach the inner system, but fortunately the delay only amounted to a number of hours. Red dwarf stars possessed less mass than yellow dwarf stars, which allowed incoming fleets to emerge closer to the center of the star system as a rule.

The journey proceeded quietly and without incident. While Ves was sure that the Vulcan Empire planted automated listening posts and the like, he wasn't concerned. He had already instructed Calabast to put the Blinding Banshee's interference capabilities to work.

Right now, the espionage ship had fully deployed her emitter arrays, causing her long and thin surface to look like a black cactus.

Strong disruptive energies spread from the starship, covering a wide portion of the expeditionary fleet. Most forms of long-range observation became scrambled as any emissions escaping from the area of effect turned fuzzy due to excess noise!

Of course, the ships and mechs closest to the Blinding Banshee suffered greatly from the disruption as well. Each of them had to enter a hardened mode where they had to fall back to more primitive forms of communication.

All of this caused considerable irritation among the people in the fleet, but it couldn't be helped. Ves wanted to maintain at least some discretion. Since he had a handy capital ship like the Blinding Banshee at his disposal, why not make use of her capabilities?

"It's pretty nice to build up a diversified fleet composition."

The greatest shortcoming of the Larkinson fleet was its lack of combat-capable vessels. However, the lack of monotony was not entirely bad as his fleet currently possessed a high adaptation level that was great for survival purposes.

As time went by, the fleet just happened to whizz past the old gas giant where Ves had once dumped a lot of potentially-incriminating evidence from the TR-3851.

"It's still the same, huh."

Though a lot of time had passed since the TR-3851 entered the Trion Enze System, the current universe was much older than that. In stellar terms, virtually no time passed for the gas giant at all. It would continue to remain in the exact same state for many ages.

"This gas giant has lived past the rise and fall of who knows how many powerful alien civilizations in the galaxy. Compared to the lifespan of ordinary organisms such as myself, it is so enormous that it is pretty much immortal!"

There was no comparison between him and this giant planet. So many people in human society were desperate to live up to 500 years, 600 years or maybe even a bit more. Yet no one set their aim at 10,000 years or 1 million years.

It couldn't be done!

There was a limit to life-prolonging treatment serum. Though the details about the most valuable versions of this product were scarce, Ves was pretty sure that none of them had reached such a ridiculous level!

"Even those old fossils who have lived through the Age of Conquest have to exit the stage some time."

Ves looked forward to that time. He vaguely guessed that most of the high-level policies of the Big Two were still determined by this band of highly-respected but inflexible geriatrics.

It explained why nothing much had happened in the preceding centuries. The people who lived through the worst periods of the Age of Conquest had become deeply traumatized by what they experienced. As a result, the policies of the MTA and the CFA had always been highly reactionary towards the excesses of those dark times.

Even after four centuries of rebuilding, these tendencies still remained strong. Ves should know since he took advantage of them to strip the Vulcan Empire of the MTA's backing!

"Still... the current order might not stay quiet for much longer. The opening of the Red Ocean is the prelude to a change in approach."

Ves didn't come up with these ideas himself. It was Minister Shederin who shared his profound perspective on the evolution of human civilization.

According to him, the gradual turn from preservation to expansion was indicative of a generational shift among the leadership of the Big Two. With all of the careful old leaders out of the way, their replacements who weren't burdened by the nightmares of the past could finally begin to implement their grander and bolder visions!

As a result, human civilization would definitely look a lot differently a century from now! With humanity's strength, it was impossible for the Big Two to limit their ambitions to just the Red Ocean.

"There are plenty more dwarf galaxies and there's also the other half of the Milky Way that we haven't conquered yet. Will we begin to take over all of those territories in my lifetime?"

His eyes shone as he contemplated this exciting future. It appeared he was born at the right time. After all of this waiting, humanity was ready to rise again! This time, everyone had thoroughly learned from all of their mistakes of the past, so there was no way that they would falter so easily this time!

"Sir, we're approaching the inner asteroid belt. Our fleet shall soon maintain a stationary orbit while the Andrenidae begins to deploy her mining mechs."

Ves nodded in understanding. "Stay on guard and pay special attention to sneaky bastards that are hiding in stealth. It's likely that there is no one out there, but it's best to make sure. Oh, please perform a thorough survey of the asteroid belt and send all of the scanning data to me. Try to record the appearances of as many asteroids as possible. You don't need to penetrate too deeply and find out their mineral composition."

Though his orders sounded unusual, his subordinates were used to them. They proceeded to perform their tasks without any hesitation.

"It's not easy picking the right asteroid from all of these spinning rocks." Ves frowned as the first detailed optical scans poured in. He already turned dizzy as he looked at a hundred different asteroids... "Even if I know how the right asteroid should look like, this will take a fair bit of time."

Chapter 3335: X Marks The Spot

When Ves chose to bury his stash of Timpala Steel inside an asteroid, he did not record any precise coordinates or anything. Neither did he plant any beacons or leave any surface clues.

He was too afraid that others might sniff out these clues and unearth his buried treasure ahead of time!

The only details he recorded in his mind was the general orbital map of the Trion Enze System and the appearance of the key asteroid.

By accounting for the passage of time, Ves was roughly able to calculate which slice of the asteroid belt he needed to start his search.

This was a crucial time-saving step! If Ves really didn't have any clue where his desired rock could be found, he would have to order his men to scan the complete ring!

However, since he was able to narrow down the search area, the operation became a lot more manageable. The fleet did not have to disperse too many assets in order to develop a good overview of the asteroids in the current zone.

"Even so, I still have to sift through a lot of rocks." Ves muttered.

He was a mech designer though. Faced with a static problem like this, he could easily engineer ways to simplify and automate his search.

He put his programming skills to use and developed a sorting mechanism that filtered the asteroids by mass, dimensions and other factors that he could still recall about the place where he buried his treasure.

He briefly had the illusion that he was an old-fashioned treasure hunter looking for a buried treasure by tracing back the X on a primitive paper map.

Just like all of those stories, it was always a challenge to figure out the definite coordinates of where the promised treasure was hidden.

"I really hope the asteroid I'm looking for hasn't collided into anything." He muttered.

Although it looked as if the asteroids in the belt were obediently orbiting around the star at the same velocity, Ves knew that a lot of collisions took place on a regular basis over time.

If the hook-shaped asteroid that he was looking for happened to smash into another large obstacle, it could have broken apart or received a jolt that catapulted it out of its regular orbit!

Although the odds of that happening to this particular rock was small, Ves was still worried that such a complication might have taken place.

If he wasn't able to rely on the details he remembered to complete his objective, then his simple search would truly turn into the equivalent of finding a needle in a haystack!

"C'mon! It has to be here somewhere!"

If he had more time and resources back then, he would have been able to arrange a more convenient hiding space. Yet because Ves was reaching the end of his Mastery trip, he could only make due with burying most of the Timpala Steel that the dwarves managed to bring out of Desala X in a seemingly random space rock.

It was the most secure choice he could make at the time. No one was bored enough to deep scan every single asteroid with powerful and expensive scanners in a star system, especially one centered around a worthless red dwarf.

Ves found it rather ironic that an immensely valuable exotic such as Timpala Steel could be found in the places that the most powerful players such as the Big Two routinely dismissed. Whether it was the Desala System or the Trion Enze System, only yokels bothered to rummage around these places.

A silent beep sounded in his mind.

His self-created sorting program found a probable match after running through the scans of thousands of asteroids.

"That quick?"

When Ves mentally called up the scanning data of the rock in question, he froze for a few seconds.

"It's... the exact same rock."

Now that he was able to look at the precise image, he no longer held any doubts.

It was the same rock!

Even after decades of tumbling around in this silent belt, the large rock only suffered a bunch of minor collisions. Perhaps its mass had been reduced by a bit and perhaps its edges looked a little differently from what he remembered, but he could still recognize enough unique craters and other distinctive marks to be 99.99 percent certain that he had stumbled upon his X!

His body shook with excitement. He came close to boarding a shuttle straight away, but he quickly suppressed his impulse.

He needed to keep his head cool. Just because he was close to his objective didn't mean it was already in the bag. He was most afraid of others fishing his prize just as he was about to take it into his possession!

In order to obscure his goal and prevent any potential sneaky bastards from swooping in at the last second, Ves began to formulate a plan.

He needed to retrieve the package in person. He trusted no one else for this job. He wanted to submit it to the System on the spot in order to minimize any problems that might occur after the Timpala Steel was brought back to the Spirit of Bentheim.

"Hmmm, I need to move quickly, though."

Eventually, he decided on a fairly simple but time-consuming plan. He instructed his subordinates to prepare a large shuttle and load it up with mining and drilling equipment.

Ves then boarded it with a small entourage consisting of himself, Lucky and his honor guard.

"Head over to this asteroid." He instructed the honor guard who sat behind the helm today. "We're going to dig a hole."

"Yes, sir."

The well-trained Kinnners didn't ask why Ves randomly wanted to go out to dig a hole in a worthless space rock in person. It wasn't their business to know these kinds of secrets.

Their job was to protect him and bring him to safety if necessary.

"Meow!"

Lucky slapped his articulated tail against Ves' helmet. The cat was pretty annoyed at being pulled out of his cozy rest.

"Don't complain, Lucky. I need you by my side to guard against any eventualities that might happen."

"Meow meow."

The shuttle ride proceeded slowly as if Ves wasn't in a hurry. When it finally reached an asteroid he designed earlier, the hatch opened up. Several guards brought out a heavy drilling machine and anchored the device on the surface of the space rock.

The drilling machine was relatively simple so the guards were easily able to set it up. Soon, it began to drill a hole through the surface. The diameter of the cavity was wide enough to fit a single soldier in heavy combat armor but not much more.

Ves, who was wearing his Unending Regalia, stood patiently at the side while Lucky was randomly zipping around.

"This is going to take a while."

Half an hour passed. They didn't just drill one hole, but several ones, each at different points on the surface of the asteroid.

There was no rule or pattern to the digging. Ves had drawn random spots on the diagram and told his lackeys to drill the holes to a certain depth.

Each time they completed the job, Ves floated through the narrow hole and poked around for fifteen minutes while he activated all of his interference devices. He accomplished nothing of note and reached the surface without showing anything special.

He then repeated this routine half-a-dozen more times before he was done with the asteroid.

"Pack up our gear. We're heading to the next asteroid."

They continued to perform this monotonous operation on other random asteroids. Ves was sure that anyone who was paying attention to him was probably able to figure out that he was looking for something.

Yet his behavior showed that he wasn't sure where his objective could be found. He could only perform a manual search by picking out the most likely candidates. So far, his search did not seem easy.

He was slowly closing in on the right asteroid, though. The hook-shaped rock that was floating around peacefully amidst lots of other rocks continued to lure him closer.

After mindlessly exploring seven empty asteroids, a lot of time had already passed. Lucky yawned as Ves and his crew boarded the shuttle once again.

"Meow..."

"I know it's a long day, but this is just a small ordeal. Please bear with it a while longer."

Even Ves yawned after spending so long to keep up the charade. He still stuck with his plan, though.

Once the shuttle pressed down on another asteroid, the honor guard brought out the drilling machine without any delay and began to drill at the first point that Ves had selected.

When Ves stepped onto the surface of the hook-shaped asteroid, he did not show any excitement. He had deliberately suppressed all of his excitement by adopting a calm and more emotional mental mask.

On the surface, he exhibited the same boredom and lack of confidence as before. Even Lucky was fooled by his subdued demeanor.

Ves yawned again as he mindlessly watched his guards drill a hole at the wrong place.

It was only when they were about to drill their fifth hole that Ves secretly became more alert.

This time, the guards were drilling hole in the deepest pit of the asteroid.

Several decades ago, a possessed dwarven body had tunneled at this approximate location.

The coordinates and the angle of the current drilling operation did not exactly coincide with the drilling operation of the past.

Ves deliberately fudged the details a bit so that the drilling machine did not exactly bore through the hole made in the past.

If that happened, the machine would encounter a lot less resistance than before. Though the chance was small, such an anomaly might get picked up by someone.

"Let's go down again, Lucky." He said as the drilling machine had reached the specified depth.

"Meow."

Ves and his cat floated down the freshly-made hole.

Once they reached the bottom, Ves activated his interference countermeasures. He not only made use of a couple of jammers, but also went as far as to call up his System comm in order to activate its Privacy Shield!

This was the strongest form of signal blocking that he had at his disposal. He was confident that not even the MTA could penetrate through it unless one of its agents was really close!

"Meow?"

Lucky finally noticed that Ves was acting differently this time. Now that he was certain that no one could see through him, he finally dropped his act and grinned.

"We're almost at the finish line, buddy. Just wait a while longer. I just need to dig a bit more."

During his previous tunnel jaunts, he already developed a habit of digging in random directions with the help of a powerful handheld mining tool.

Therefore, his current pattern did not deviate from the one he set before.

Ves leveraged his implant to calculate the coordinates of his original stash so that he could figure out the direction of where he needed to dig.

"This way."

He angled the mining tool at a downwards angle and steadily began to create a new hole.

He was quite wary of accidentally damaging the container that may have degraded over time, so he did not dare to dig too fast.

Eventually, he stumbled upon an empty pocket. He immediately halted his forward progress and instead worked to widen the hole and the area around his find.

When a light shone through the newly-made tunnel, a very familiar reinforced metal box rested on the other end. Its crude construction, low-quality materials looked so familiar that Ves had a feeling he had the illusion that he had just made it yesterday!

To think that he had left this treasure box behind in a time before his birth.

"Meow?"

Lucky looked befuddled.

"Be careful. Let me handle what's inside. Its value is beyond measure."

Right now, Ves was afraid that Lucky's hunger would get the better of him. A material such as Timpala Steel should probably be an irresistible meal to the gluttonous gem cat!

Ves was already prepared to launch Blinky in case Lucky wanted to take a bite.

Seeing nothing drastic had happened, he moved through the tunnel and slowly reached the reinforced box.

Before doing anything else, Ves deployed additional safeguards by unpacking a collection of sheets that was mounted to the rear of his Unending Regalia. He quickly built a simple metal hut around the tunnel that further helped with dampening and blocking signals.

After making several cautious sweeps, which included throwing a pile of luminescent dust particles in the cavity to detect possible infiltrators, Ves finally felt secure enough to retrieve his prize.

"Let's open this box."

He drew out a multitool from his toolbelt and began to cut through the reinforced container. Since it was made out of cheap third-class materials, it didn't take long for Ves to open his box.

His eyes widened as he keenly looked through his helmet.

The chunky material was neatly preserved inside the box. Even without scanning it, he recognized that it was the genuine article. It's appearance was an exact match to his memories and the passage of time had not affected it in the slightest!

A huge weight lifted off his shoulders! He was afraid that the MTA or someone else managed to trace his route back then and dug up his stash ahead of time. It turned out that he had worried in vain!

"It's finally within my reach!"

Chapter 3336: System Update

Ves did not delay any further. He grabbed hold of the Timpala Steel with his gauntlets.

"Meow!"

Lucky finally discovered the remarkable nature of Timpala Steel, but before he could dart in to have a bite, the strange material shimmered before the chunk dematerialized out of existence.

"MEEEEOOOW!"

There was no question what had happened. The System had finally acted and absorbed the ore that could be refined into the substance known as Timpala Steel!

Strangely enough, the System did not devour all of the ore. It apparently didn't need all of it and wasn't inclined to absorb any excess. Only a narrow sliver the size of a finger was left of this mysterious material.

"MEOW!

Lucky did not hesitate in the slightest. The cat did not ask for permission and darted forward in order to stuff the finger-sized chunk of ore through his gullet!

Pure pleasure radiated from his body as he deposited the ore without even bothering to break it up with his teeth. That would take time which Ves could have used to pry it out of his maw!

"Well, I'll let you get away with it this time." Ves scoffed at his pet's greedy behavior. "Let's consider this your compensation for all of the stuff you had to go through recently."

"Meow~"

The cat's metallic exterior already began to ripple. This was an indication that his body was morphing as a response of what he had absorbed!

"Sure enough, Timpala Steel is definitely not an average material."

Lucky had eaten a great variety of exotics over the years. Average exotics no longer provided him with any measurable upgrades. Only the more powerful and special ones could upgrade his attributes and functions.

The tremors quickly came to an end, though. Lucky did not look much different from before. Perhaps his exterior had turned a little paler than before, but the uncertainty level was too high to be sure about this change.

"Not enough." Ves judged.

What Lucky obtained was doubtlessly useful to him in some way, but the crumbs left behind by the System hardly sated the cat's appetite!

While the cat was enjoying his own little reward, Ves paid attention to what happened next.

He mentally received a couple of brief messages despite not activating the System's interface.

[Congratulations for completing your first S-Rank Supply Mission. By fulfilling the sole objective of Material Supply 3, you have overcome difficult odds to source a pinnacle material.]

[You have received 1 use of the Inventorize ability.]

[You have received 10 golden lottery tickets.]

His eyes shone brighter as he finally obtained his long-awaited rewards!

Though the rewards yielded by the golden lottery tickets were often random and unpredictable, Ves should have a decent chance of drawing a truly valuable prize with 10 drawing opportunities.

"Maybe it's too much for me to hope I'll get a reward akin to the Grand Dynamo, but whatever else I can get won't be too shabby hopefully."

What Ves truly valued was the Inventorize ability. This allowed him to materialize and dematerialize a single possession.

As a paranoid bastard, Ves was always afraid of losing access to his possessions. This ability suited him just fine. As long as no one was powerful enough to block or hinder this capability, he would always have a solution at hand.

He had thought a lot about which valuable item he should use this reward for. The capability of being able to recall any possession should never be spent lightly.

The first time he gained access to the Inventorize ability, he did not hesitate much before he used it on his System comm. There was no safer way to carry it, hide it and keep it hidden from organizations like the MTA than to store it in an intangible state.

With that, Ves was much more assured he would be able to preserve his greatest secret.

Now, he was faced with a new opportunity to turn another crucial possession into his inseparable loadout.

Ves hadn't made up his mind yet. Despite months of mulling over this question, he had not come closer to a definite answer!

"My Unending Regalia is a rather obvious choice. Not only does it offer me protection against both material and spiritual attacks, but it can be enhanced through spiritual means due to the nature of its primary material. It can also protect me from exposure to hostile environments."

Ves wasn't worried about the Unending Regalia becoming obsolete. Just like the Ship of Theseus, as long as the overall object was the same, it did not matter if Ves updated its configuration over time. Only when it was completely destroyed would the Inventorize ability lose its target.

This turned his Unending Regalia into an excellent investment if he prioritized defense and survival. What was even better was that the suit of armor consisted of a complete set of integrated systems and modules.

It could do more than offer protection! It could also integrate scanners, incorporate a minifab, mount integrated weapons and so on. As long as it didn't take up too much space, Ves could stuff it with all kinds of useful goodies!

"It's a highly compelling choice, that's for sure."

In fact, it would have been even better if Ves was able to Inventorize an even greater machine such as a mech, an enormous bot or even an entire starship!

However, the System wasn't that generous. Ves had already inquired about the limits of this reward. He couldn't go too far. The Unending Regalia was already on the large side, and it wasn't even that bulky compared to other suits of combat armor!

The only reason why Ves hesitated to Inventorize his Unending Regalia was because there were a couple of other compelling choices.

The Hammer of Brilliance that he recently made housed his incarnation. Though it was not too remarkable at the moment, over time its continued exposure and growth alongside Vulcan would definitely turn it into an exceptional totem.

The greater its power, the more difficult it was to retain it! While Ves was sure that he could accommodate Vulcan in another home, losing the hammer that was made out of scarce and priceless Unending alloy would hurt a lot.

In the long run, Inventorizing the Hammer of Brilliance so that Ves would always have a hammer that had endless growth potential by his side!

It was not only an invaluable tool for various production-related activities, but could also serve as a weapon in a pinch. Maybe its lethality was far behind the Amastendira, but it was a lot more foolproof.

"Maybe I should consider Inventorizing the Larkinson Mandate as well."

It was not only the core artifact of his clan, but also the home of the Golden Cat. Perhaps it was not an indispensable object to Ves, but it was of immeasurable value to the Larkinsons as a whole!

However, Ves was more inclined to serve his immediate needs first. Both his Unending Regalia and his Hammer of Brilliance were much more important to his survival than a special book.

After all, if he ever ended up in a personal crisis situation, he doubted he would be able to solve his problems by swinging around a big tome!

"Well, I can make up my mind later. Even if I make a sub-optimal choice, I still have four more Supply Missions that I need to complete."

It was at this time that Ves received another notification.

[The Mech Designer System is currently undergoing an upgrade. During this time, it is inaccessible and not responsive to any commands. Thank you for your patience.]

A small presence in his awareness had dimmed. Ves could vaguely feel profound fluctuations taking place in another realm.

"Well, it doesn't look like it will wake up soon."

This was another hopeful sign. The Timpala Steel that Ves had just delivered to the System had to be a powerful supplement for it to take an extended break to integrate this extraordinary material!

Ves was deeply curious about the properties of Timpala Steel. What did the System seek to gain from it? He doubted it was because it wanted to obtain a tougher shell.

"Oh well. Since I'm unlikely to get my hands on anymore of this material, it doesn't matter too much."

After Ves made sure he completed his objective, he began to clean up the site.

"Lucky?"

"Meow..." Lucky slowly woke up from the bliss of his surprisingly fantastic snack.

Ves pointed at the empty metal box. "Eat."

"Meow..."

"I said eat! I need you to get rid of the evidence!"

Lucky made an ugly hacking motion. "Meow meow!"

"I know it tastes like crap to you, but I need every trace of this box gone. I can't bring it out of this hole and I can't destroy it with my weapons either. If I fire at it with my Amastendira, I'll just vaporize it, which will cause a lot of particles to spread around. I can't afford to leave such traces behind. Only you can make it disappear entirely!"

"Meowwww!" His cat looked aggrieved again.

"Remember who brought you here and allowed you to eat a precious substance in the first place. This is a material that even the System was greedy for! You've eaten the meat. Now it's time for you to eat your veggies."

It took a bit of time, but Lucky eventually did what was necessary. Tears seemed to leak from Lucky's eyes as he begrudgingly ate the low-quality metal container until there was nothing left.

He felt as if he had been downgraded to a garbage disposal bot!

Ves and his cat soon emerged out of the hole while looking hardly any different from before. Though Lucky's mood was more subdued, Ves did not exhibit any evidence that he had completed his long-awaited objective.

"Let's go drill another hole." He instructed even though it was completely redundant.

An hour passed by as Ves suppressed his happiness and continued to act out his charade. The more holes he drilled, the smaller the chance that someone would find anything suspicious when they retraced his activities in this asteroid belt.

Ves began to yawn again as he looked forward to ending this exhausting but incredibly fruitful day.

Just as he thought about leaving this damned star sector and completing his journey to the beyonder gate, a sudden development occurred.

"SIR! An asteroid several hundred-thousand kilometers away has exploded!"

Ves looked puzzled as he responded to the emergency notification. "Did something hit the asteroid?"

"It's not an artificial explosion! We are detecting powerful energy emissions. Wait, we've detected the emergence of a starship. It appears that the vessel has been hiding in this asteroid belt for an extended period of time!"

"What?!"

Ves signalled his honor guard to abort the drilling. They quickly brought back the heavy gear to the shuttle while Ves and Lucky entered as well.

As the shuttle was making a beeline back to the Spirit of Bentheim, Ves received further updates about the unveiled presence.

He even received a live feed from a long-ranged optical sensor. It displayed a small frigate with typical Vulcanite design characteristics.

"Tch! More dwarves! Will I ever get rid of them!?" Ves exasperatingly said.

He did not even want to wait any further to assess why this dwarven frigate was here or whether she posed a threat.

Ves dialed General Verle.

"Your orders, sir?"

"Tell Venerable Stark to bring out the Amaranto and fire her most powerful shot at this unknown frigate! Don't shoot to disable. Destroy the ship utterly! I don't want any crew or module to remain intact!"

"Are you sure, sir? A single dwarven sub-capital ship poses no threat to our fleet, especially at this distance."

"JUST DO IT!" Ves insisted!

Though Venerable Stark hadn't gone out to patrol, she and her fellow expert pilots had always remained on standby during this quiet but sensitive time.

It only took three minutes for the Amaranto to launch into space. It did not fly too far away and only sought to find a position where it could gain an uninterrupted firing angle on the distant frigate.

Though the distance was rather extreme, it was still doable for a precise expert rifleman mech to hit a frigate-sized vessel!

Venerable Stark had to take her time to aim though. She minutely adjusted the precision aiming mechanisms of her expert mech in order to ensure the angle of fire was exactly right. Even a microscopic deviation was enough for her attack to miss by several kilometers.

Once she judged that her aim was true, she mentally pulled the trigger.

A full-powered resonance-enhanced laser beam soared forward at the speed of light and almost instantly struck the bow of the distant dwarven frigate!

Yet when the beam faded, the ship was completely intact!

"That's impossible!"

"Wait! We're detecting a new source of emissions. It's a mech!"

The long-ranged optical sensor detected that the Amaranto's powerful laser attack had been blocked by a resonance shield.

Ves immediately grew suspicious. Though the distance was too far to capture more detailed readings, his instincts became increasingly more unsettled the more he looked at the feed.

"This mech..."

The more the image cleared up, the more Ves and every other observer was able to get a glimpse at the dwarven machine.

"It's an expert mech, and not a cheap one considering how easily it blocked the Amaranto's attack."

"It doesn't appear to carry a physical shield. It must be an offensive expert mech."

"Is it stronger than the Gatekeeper?"

Ves' panic suddenly spiked. "THAT'S NOT AN EXPERT MECH! THAT'S AN ACE MECH!"

Chapter 3337: A Greater Height

Ves never encountered an ace pilot and ace mech before in his entire life.

Back when he lived in the Bright Republic, these existences were too powerful and distant to the likes of him. They only showed up occasionally in second-rate states, but even then they were treated as the trump cards and the crown jewels of their respective people.

Whereas an average citizen still had the opportunity to get in touch with an expert pilot if they tried hard or if they were lucky, ace pilots were too grand and special for others to approach!

The descriptions that Ves had read about ace pilots was that they were much more closer to gods than humans. There was no way that anyone could mistake them as average and that they were noticeably less bound by human constraints and conventions than normal!

Their willpower was legendary, and it took an unimaginable amount of struggle and introspection for them to rise above the height of other expert pilots.

They were so driven to pursue their goals, ideals or convictions that not even reality could stop them from fulfilling what they perceived to be their duty!

They were living Saints, inhuman warriors and soldiers whose excellence put them close to the apex of human society no matter their origins or background!

Each of them possessed an incomparably honored status in the Mech Trade Association. Should they ever feel disgusted or become alienated with the states they originally owed their loyalty to, ace pilots always had the option to become a part of one of the Big Two, which would completely propel them to entirely new heights!

It was because of the latter that cultivating and keeping ace pilots into service was incredibly challenging. Third-rate states simply couldn't afford the resources required to commission and maintain a powerful ace mech!

Even second-rate states were enormously burdened by the huge amount of requirements they had to fulfill in order to retain a small group of ace pilots.

Yet it was worth it. To those who could afford the enormous expense and trouble, the value of an ace pilot equipped with a fitting ace mech was immeasurable, both on and off the battlefield!

In times of peace, an ace pilot was a national symbol, a hero beyond compare and a model that every mech pilot in a state aspired to follow.

No one knew how to pilot mechs and fight with them better than an ace pilot. Their piloting skills were so inhumanly powerful that they could even guide the training of expert pilots!

This meant that the expert pilots who managed to obtain the tutelage of a Saint faced fewer bottlenecks and could potentially save years of groping around in the dark. Ultimately, this led to a collective increase of strength in the high-level combat strength of an entire state.

It was not incorrect to say that a single ace pilot was the strongest contributing factor to enabling the rise of high-tier expert pilots!

This was also the main reason why Patriarch Reginald Cross was close to advancing to ace pilot himself. The tutelage and training provided by his father played an indispensable role in his relatively rapid advancement.

Yet no matter how close he was to becoming an ace pilot, the enormous wall in front of him couldn't be overcome with just a casual push!

There was a vast difference in strength between high-tier expert pilots and the freshest ace pilot.

What was more horrible was that once an individual managed to succeed where thousands if not tens of thousands of expert pilots had failed, their impressive qualifications enabled them to enjoy a rapid period of development right afterwards, causing their effective combat strength to soar in a single decade!

Once they became a halfgod, it would be a long time before they encountered another bottleneck.

While junior ace pilots were noticeably weaker than senior ace pilots, properly speaking both of them still belonged to the same broad tier.

Whereas Senior Mech Designers had to struggle immensely in order to realize their design philosophies, a junior ace pilot only needed a good ace mech and a good training environment to slowly work to becoming a senior ace pilot.

Once they reached this point, a senior ace pilot had become one of the foremost mech pilots of human civilization.

Since god pilots almost never showed their might in human-to-human conflicts, ace pilots were the pinnacle soldiers that states could deploy in their wars.

Even then, ace pilots rarely intervened and only fought the battles that truly mattered. The loss of each one was incomparably painful. Not only would their fall inflict a huge morale blow to friendly troops, but it would also deprive a state of a high-tier expert pilot training machine!

This led to a custom where ace pilots were treated in a similar fashion to weapons of mass destruction. They were too destructive and risky to deploy in battle, so they were most often used as a form of deterrence.

The existence of a sufficient number of ace pilots was often enough for a losing state to give its opposition some scruples.

"A state or organization with an ace pilot is a completely different beast."

There were many reasons for that, but just their amazing combat power was enough to upend the equation of many battles!

When the expeditionary fleet initially discovered that an unknown dwarven frigate and dwarven ace mech had emerged from hiding and aggressively accelerated closer, every human panicked.

Even though an ace mech was just a single machine, no one dared to take it lightly!

The emergence of the dwarven frigate at this time was obviously not a coincidence. The fact that this new group was heading directly towards the intruding human visitors did not bode well for the latter.

No one had forgotten that Ves had essentially triggered the collapse of the Vulcan Empire and the deaths of a huge number of dwarven citizens!

How could a Vulcanite ace pilot ever stand by when the culprit responsible for ruining his or own state happened to be so close?

Even from a distance of over 100,000 kilometers away, Ves could faintly feel an intense hostility directly pressing on his heart!

"We need to get out of here!"

"We're evacuating towards the nearest Lagrange point, but our larger and slower vessels can't exceed the acceleration of an ace mech and a frigate-class vessel! According to our current estimates, the unknown enemies will enter our defensive envelope 40 minutes before our main vessels can jump out of this star system! Only our faster and smaller sub-capital ships can evacuate safely!"

"Then transfer our civilians as well as any non-essential personnel we can spare to these swift boats and get them out of here first!"

"We'll strain their life support systems if we do that, sir. They can't take on too many passengers without performing time-consuming modifications."

"Then put them into vacsuits and transfer additional supplies over to them! Be creative. This is an emergency right now and we can't risk our civilians!"

The entire expeditionary fleet was scrambling due to the appearance of a single mech. It sounded absolutely ridiculous for the Golden Skull Alliance to become so spooked by a single machine, but this was no joke. Even if the enemy ace mech wouldn't be able to beat tens of thousands of mechs, it could certainly wipe out a huge chunk of the fleet in the process!

When a shuttle speedily returned to the Spirit of Bentheim, Ves and Lucky raced to the bridge.

Every ship in the fleet had entered red alert. Alarms were ringing through the corridors and red lights flashed as if to emphasize the urgency of the moment.

For now, the expeditionary fleet considered the current threat to be no weaker than the Ferril punitive fleet they fought off earlier!

"How strong is an ace mech?!"

"I have no idea."

"I heard they can fight against a thousand mechs at once."

"Pff. Just a thousand? Try at least ten times as much!"

"I've heard stories where they wiped out entire mech armies by themselves!"

"That's only under ideal circumstances where the ace mech is able to force the enemy to fight on its terms."

Not many Larkinsons possessed a clear idea on the actual combat performance of ace mechs. This was a deficiency in knowledge that couldn't be helped.

Though ace pilots and ace mechs were famed and admired throughout human space, much of the public information about them was too general. Even the footage of ace mechs in action hardly clarified anything. They just existed to propagandize the Saints and make them look cool.

Ves wasn't any better off. The mech design universities didn't teach anything about ace mechs because the chance that any graduate would ever get to work with them was too miniscule!

This kind of high-end knowledge simply wasn't accessible to Ves and everyone else in the Larkinson Clan.

This was a potentially fatal flaw. knowing your enemy was extremely crucial in finding a way to beat it. Without knowing the properties of an ace mech, Ves couldn't be sure what measures he needed to take to defeat such a monstrous opponent.

Fortunately, the Larkinson Clan wasn't alone.

"Marshal Ariadne Wodin! Patriarch Reginald Cross! We need to talk on an emergency channel!" Ves shouted in a priority channel as he continued on his way to the bridge.

The current crisis situation did not provide him with the luxury to calmly talk about the current issue. Every minute counted as the enemy at the rear continued to close in at a steady rate!

Once Ves reached the bridge and sat on his observer's seat, he set up a privacy screen and accepted an impromptu conference call between the other leaders of the Golden Skull Alliance.

He quickly noted that Patriarch Reginald had brought along Professor Benedict as well. He didn't mind the added presence as a Senior Mech Designer most certainly possessed a greater insight on ace mechs. Together with Patriarch Reginald's second-hand information on ace pilots, the duo from the Cross Clan definitely knew more about their current opponent than anyone else in the fleet!

"You did it again, Ves. You provoked another powerful enemy." Professor Benedict tiredly sighed.

Ves felt quite miserable about that. How could he know that a frigate carrying an invaluable ace mech had been hiding in this asteroid belt for months if not years just to see whether someone would come and sniff around?

There was definitely something fishy about this, but the immediate crisis was too acute for him to get distracted about these superfluous topics!

"We don't have much time, so let's put the non-essential matters aside." Ves said with a touch of urgency in his voice. "What can you tell me about the enemy closing in on our heels?"

"You don't want to fight against a proper ace mech." Reginald said with a grave expression. His eyes turned gloomy as he thought about the distant enemy. "Even I don't want to fight against this dwarven machine. The gap in strength is too big."

Ves looked a bit shocked. He always saw the Cross Patriarch as a gloryhound obsessed with challenging strong opponents to stimulate a breakthrough. Another powerful enemy had come to his doorstep now, but instead of accepting the challenge like usual, Reginald resolutely refused to contemplate the idea of fighting an ace mech!

"Are ace mechs truly that strong?"

The three older people in the conference call shared deep glances with each other.

"You have no idea, Patriarch Ves." Marshal Ariadne shook her head and broke the silence. "In the Komodo War, the ace mechs of the Friday Coalition or the Hexadric Hegemony only took action a handful of times so far. Each time they acted on their opponents, an ocean of mechs fell without inflicting any harm. Not even a whole mech division has a chance of victory against such powerful machines. This is no longer an opponent where overwhelming numbers can ensure victory."

The pressure on Ves grew heavier now that he became a little more aware how dreadful it was to be targeted by an ace mech!

Chapter 3338: The Mountain Hammer

"Meow."

Lucky nervously crawled onto the shoulder pad of the Unending Regalia.

Against armored infantry or a lone mech, the cat was confident he could fight them off. Resisting an expert mech or an ace mech was another matter, though!

Extraordinary mechs possessed too many advantages over Lucky. Not only did the machines enjoy a powerful scale advantage, the addition of expert pilots or ace pilots

resulted in a powerful synergistic relationship where they could leverage awesome powers that were no less impressive than Lucky's capabilities!

The gem cat's powerful phasing abilities allowed him to pass through any solid obstacles, but the resonance shields of extraordinary mechs gave him no chance to sneak into a cockpit and assassinate the pilot.

In fact, even if their resonance shields broke, expert pilots could still sense a presence like Lucky sneaking around. As long as they expended some effort, they could launch a powerful attack that could certainly overpower the cat's defenses!

If Lucky happened to become an enormous mechanical monstrosity that was at least the size of a mech, then he might be able to put up a decent fight, but he was currently the size of a common housecat!

Even if miniaturization was amazing, there were hard limits to how much power could be stuffed in a limited volume. Lucky needed to go through an exponentially greater amount of development to even match up against the likes of an expert mech!

"Hey. Don't panic. We'll try and get out of this. There's still a bit of distance between us and the enemy." Ves reached out and gently patted his pet.

He continued to listen carefully as the Crossers gave Ves a brief overview on what made ace mechs different from lesser machines.

"I won't speak much about ace mechs. My mech designer can tell you more about them." Patriarch Reginald gruffly said. "What I can tell you is that ace pilots are irresistible. You can still kill them if they are not in their mechs, but that never happens for obvious reasons."

The MTA would never let anyone get away with assassinating an ace pilot! As long as its investigators employed their full technological capabilities to investigate a suspicious death, the culprits and the ones who ordered the hits would get exposed sooner or later.

Though Ves heard sporadic rumors over the galactic net that some people managed to get away with such a horrible deed, it only ever happened in the galactic center where the technology level was high enough to frustrate the MTA's search capabilities.

Patriarch Reginald continued his explanation. "As for when they are piloting their ace mechs, that is when they truly unlock their strength. An ace pilot's will is so grand and heavy that a Saint can only leverage his complete potential with the help of an incredibly strong medium. Once his condition is met, the result is a combination where something close to a god has descended onto the battlefield!"

That was quite a bombastic description, but it was too vague for Ves. What he needed wasn't fairy tales, but solid data!

"Can you be more concrete on how powerful ace pilots can be?" He asked. "For example, can you give us a quick estimate on whether our current lineup of mechs and expert mechs can defeat the ace mech?"

Much to his relief, none of the others answered that it was impossible. That meant there was still a chance.

"We roughly know our own strength." Marshal Ariadne stated. "That is not enough for us to determine whether our chances of defeating the enemy ace mech are realistic. Similar to expert pilots, there is a broad range of ace pilots that can range from strong to almost invincible. None of them are weak, mind you, but as long as their ace mechs aren't too exaggerated and haven't progressed too much, it may be possible to take them down... but only at a ruinous cost."

While the Glory Seeker leader talked, Ves just received a critical report from the Black Cats.

"Ah, sorry to interrupt you, but our intelligence service has just obtained critical intelligence about the ace mech that just showed up. According to our investigation, the ace mech is a known machine in the Vulcan Empire. It is the Olympus Mons, a famed hammer-wielding ace mech piloted by Saint Yila Mayorka, the Mountain Hammer. She once served in the elite 5th Imperial Giants mech regiment, which is one of the honor guard units that is responsible for protecting the grand regent of the Vulcan Empire."

Everyone's eyes widened. This was an incomparably great identity. It was natural for the head of state or head of government of a powerful second-rate state to enjoy the highest degree of protection. As long as an ace pilot was loyal enough, he or she would not look down on guarding the highest leader of a state!

According to the intelligence brief that Ves received, the 5th Imperial Giants was not just one of the grand regent's protection duties, but also enjoyed a rich tradition. It was one of the best performing units in the rebellion and had always been based in the Uriburn Province, the center of power of the entire Vulcan Empire.

The reason why this mech regiment was called the Imperial Giants was because they were one of the few units that had been given the privilege of becoming the honored guards of the emperor of the dwarven state shortly after its founding.

Of course, since the Vulcan Empire's throne was empty, the Imperial Giants defaulted to protecting whoever occupied the office of grand regent.

"If she's one of the big dwarven chief's personal bodyguards, then what is she doing here?" Marshal Ariadne asked. "With the Vulcan Empire assaulted on all sides, shouldn't this dwarven Saint

"The report states that Saint Yila Mayorka and her Olympus Mons disappeared from the Uriburn Province almost eleven years ago. Could they have been staying on that dwarven frigate that camouflaged herself as an asteroid for all of this time?" Reginald questioned with a frown.

If that was true, then the patience and dedication that this so-called Mountain Hammer showed was certainly superhuman!

"Let's get back to the question at hand." Ves said. "How strong is an ace mech? How strong is the Olympus Mons? For now, it doesn't appear to be able to threaten us, but it will be a different story once it comes close enough to put its hammer to use. Can we repel it by bombarding it with all of our ranged mechs?"

"Unlikely." Patriarch Reginald shook his head. "In the Garlen Empire, it is a well-known rule that ordinary mech pilots should never bother to attack ace mechs. The reason for that is the domain field that these powerful machines can project in an area around their frames."

"What can this field do, exactly?"

"Domain fields or Saint Kingdoms as they are sometimes referred to are superpowered resonance fields that can stretch across kilometers. Ace pilots have much greater control of what goes on in their territory. They can easily block or weaken a massive amount of incoming ordinance because they all have to go through the target's domain field first. The effectiveness of the domain field is not low, so a single ace mech can easily block the attacks of entire mech divisions even if they aren't oriented towards defense."

"There are still limits to how long an ace pilot can keep up a domain field." Marshal Ariadne added. "The issue is that they can potentially sustain their domain fields for hours. Resonance-empowered attacks launched by expert pilots can deplete them a lot faster, but the differences in strength are too great most of the time. Besides, we only have a single ranged expert mech at our disposal."

That was bad news. The existence of something as strong and ridiculous as a domain field provided ace mechs with the capital to massacre tens of thousands of regular mechs while using their superior defenses and mobility to retain their initiative. No amount of regular mechs could stop these potent machines from pushing through their attacks or withdrawing if a powerful response was about to arrive.

Patriarch Reginald sighed. "Let me give you a bit of context, Patriarch Ves. Are expert pilots strong, you think?"

"Uhm, sure."

"According to a resonance meter, an expert pilot measures from 1 to 67 laveres. An ace pilot measures between 67 to 1545 laveres. In practice, no ace pilot will stay under 100 laveres for long. Their strength will quickly outpace that of an expert pilot to such a degree that each and every Saint can crush dozens of Venerables. This is why expert pilots are weak."

Ves shuddered underneath his Unending Regalia. "Do you really see yourself as weak?"

"That is how I always saw myself." Patriarch Reginald replied in a ridiculing tone. "Expert pilots are only strong to normal people. At our level, my fellow expert pilots and I are practically children. Our ability to leverage our will to produce true resonance looks impressive at first, but it is actually too weak and crude. Our proud resonance shields and resonance abilities are poor copies of the real deal. It is only at the level of an ace pilot that the laws of reality can finally be overridden by the laws mastered by the individual Saints!"

This was a new concept that Ves had never heard of. This was genuine high-end information that only a select group of people knew about.

Some of the traits about domain fields sounded similar to how he and his design spirits employed their own domains. However, they weren't capable of overriding one law for another!"

"When an expert pilot advances to ace pilot, his strongest combat means and the skills he has mastered the most will become sublimated into something greater." Reginald said. "For example, a swordswoman such as Venerable Dise will undoubtedly develop a domain field that is at least based around swords. They've moved beyond the level of mere specialties or techniques. They've evolved into that pilot's personal kingdom, a field where he can exert his strongest attacks with much greater strength, variety and control than before. This is already close to how actual god pilots fight."

Ves understood the gist of the Cross Patriarch's message.

To put it simply, expert pilots were merely upgraded versions of regular mech pilots. They were powerful to be sure, but they still possessed many of the weaknesses of mortal pilots. They were the equivalent of children who could pretend they were as strong as their parents, but in practice they just fumbled around with their toys.

Ace pilots were above this level. They grew up into their teens or early adolescence and could already perform some of the more simple tasks of adults. They had already made significant strides to transitioning into a transcendent life form that their force of will already carried the power of a god in some ways!

The more Ves learned about ace mechs, the less confidence he held that his fleet could repel the approaching dwarven ace mech. Massed numbers no longer appeared to be

as helpful. The only available options that might truly cause this monster to pause was to employ his expert mechs or his battle formations!

Soon, Ves received another notification.

"One of our scouting bots just came close enough to perform a reliable measurement on the resonance strength Olympus Mons. The readings currently average at 647 laveres."

Everyone looked heavy while Patriarch Reginald's eyes widened. Out of everyone, he knew what this meant most of all. This was already 11 times more laveres than what the Cross Patriarch was able to reach with his Bolvar Rage!

Yet that was a misleading comparison. The lavere scale was not linear but more complex.

In practice, the Olympus Mons was at least 100 times stronger than the Bolvar Rage depending on the criteria! The former could easily crush a company of expert mechs while only incurring light damage at most. That was why ace mechs were often considered to be the equivalent of weapons of mass destruction. There was just no stopping them once they unleashed their awe-inspiring might!

Ves softly gulped. "Is an ace mech who measures at 647 laveres an opponent that we can even resist?"

"..."

Chapter 3339: True Friends

With each minute that passed, the oppression that the Olympus Mons exerted on the expeditionary fleet increased.

Despite the immense distance at this time, everyone felt as if they were being chased by an indomitable bear that kept gaining on them. As long as the powerful monster finally caught up, their bodies would easily get torn apart by just a single bear slap!

Of course, the running humans did not give up their chances of survival. While they were fleeing, some of the humans started to fire their weapons at the looming threat. Even if the hide of the bear was too thick to suffer any damage from these attacks, there was always a chance that it might help!

This was what happened right now. While the Golden Skull Alliance was preparing its faster ships to escape ahead of time, the ranged mechs of the Larkinson Clan had already begun to fire back at the approaching threat!

It was extremely difficult to achieve a high hit rate at this distance. Energy weapon discharges such as laser beams exhibited the highest degree of accuracy while physical weapons such as gauss rifles were much less reliable at extreme ranges.

Even so, none of the Transcendent Punishers, Eternal Redemptions and Bright Warriors armed with ranged weapons dared to slacken off too much. Ammunition and energy cells could easily be replenished later on. Lives could never be restored once they were lost!

Commander Melkor of the Avatars of Myth, Commander Chancy of the Penitent Sisters, Commander Cinnabar of the Battle Criers, Commander Casella of the Living Sentinels and so on were all exhorting their own subordinates to shoot at the closing dwarven ace mechs as if they were in the middle of an apocalypse!

"Don't get paralyzed by fear! Just shoot as fast as your weapon systems can handle. That enormous resonance shield projected by the ace mech looks impressive but probably costs the ace pilot a huge amount of effort to maintain. As long as we drain its energy, the ace mech won't be as scary anymore."

"So what if we're about to die? Our deaths will have meaning as long as we achieve an important goal! Right now, we must buy enough time for our civilians and other clansmen to evacuate from this star system. This dwarven frigate can't chase all of our starships, especially if we split up. Most of us might not make it out of this star sector alive, but our clan shall definitely live on due to our valor today!"

Resisting against a single ace mech was the greatest challenge that every mech pilot in the clan had faced up until now. They were so horrified that hardly anyone thought they could get out alive!

Fortunately, they were trained and disciplined enough to maintain their composure. They clung onto their duty like a lifeline and did their best to fire their weapons if possible.

Even the melee mech pilots such as the Swordmaidens prepared themselves for a suicidal charge. No matter how invincible the opponent seemed, they would never give up without a fight!

"Our sacrifice will have meaning!"

"Fight not for your lives, but for the lives of our fellow clansmen. We are soldiers. This is the time for you to discover what it truly means to serve!"

Though General Verle was glad that the Larkinson Army held up so far, he feared that this was only a temporary condition.

Once the Olympus Mons came close enough to envelop its opponents into its domain field, it would be hard for any mech pilot to remain brave when they were being crushed by the ace pilot's enormous will!

When Verle took a look at what the other mechs in the fleet were doing, he began to frown.

"Why are you hesitating?"

So far, only the mechs of the Larkinson Clan opened fire!

The Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan had yet to take action against the approaching dwarves. The roughly 10,000 mercenary mechs that guarded the outer perimeter of the fleet did not take action either.

During his emergency discussion with the other leaders of the alliance, Ves couldn't help but bring up these points.

"From what I've heard so far, the domain fields of ace pilots are almost impossible to overwhelm through massed regular attacks, but it should still be possible. If you guys join in on the attack, we stand a better chance at overwhelming the Olympus Mons."

Neither Marshal Ariadne nor Patriarch Reginald provided an immediate answer. It was clear to the both of them that the surprise dwarf enemy was primarily interested in attacking Ves and maybe his clan. They were the primary culprits behind the Vulcan Empire's rapid collapse.

As for them? They were accessories as worst and bystanders as best. There was no way the Vulcanites held the same degree of animosity towards them as Ves. Their prospects of survival were actually much greater as a consequence, provided that they split up immediately and distanced themselves from the Larkinson Clan right away!

Ves' mood darkened as he saw this response. Though his allies hadn't said no, they were considering it. He had learned a long time ago that times like these tested whether he could truly count on his friends and allies.

This was also why he held high respect for people like the Swordmaidens. They had faced these kinds of circumstances with the Larkinson Clan before and always stayed true to their oaths and loyalties. His trust in them was ironclad.

As for the Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan, it appeared their willingness to share the misfortunes of the Larkinson Clan was not as absolute!

Professor Benedict decided to enlighten Ves about an important detail. "The mercenary organizations that you've hired to defend the fleet against attackers will not act this time. A standard mercenary contract stipulates many exceptional circumstances where the

contractors are not obliged to fulfill their normal duties. Squaring off against a hostile ace mech will definitely trigger a force majeure clause. There is absolutely no way that mech pilots for hire are willing to die for something as trivial as money."

"Damnit!" Ves gritted his teeth. "You can never count on mercenaries when you need them the most!"

Even the larger and more powerful mercenary organizations still shared the same flaws as their smaller cousins. None of their mech pilots were truly willing to die for a cause that was greater than themselves. They only truly cared about earning as much money as possible while keeping their lives intact. As long as either of these conditions could no longer be met, they could no longer be counted upon to perform their services!

Ves did not bother to ask Shederin to persuade the mercenaries to help the expeditionary fleet out for this reason. No matter how much money the clan was willing to throw at them, nothing was more important than preserving their lives and company assets!

He let out a deep sigh. "Then what about you two? Can I count on the Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan to abide by their commitments?"

He did not want to play any games at the moment. He wanted to know straight away if the Golden Skull Alliance actually meant something to them or if they were too selfish to rely upon in the long-term.

Patriarch Reginald was as direct as ever. He did not agonize over the decision. "The Cross Clan shall always meet its commitment. The Larkinson Clan is our ally and our comrade in arms. We have fought against ace mechs before. The Olympus Mons shall have to resist our fire as well if it wants to destroy the Larkinson Clan!"

Of course, the last time the Cross Clan fought a proper battle against an ace mech, Saint Hemmington Cross was still alive back then! The Crossers were far from being able to resist another ace mech now that they were only a shadow of their former glory!

That made Ves appreciate Cross Patriarch's decisive commitment even more. Expert pilots were difficult to work with on some matters, but there were times where their honor and their decisiveness worked out in his favor.

It was not for nothing that high-level expert pilots made for awful politicians.

Ves grinned. "Thank you, Patriarch Reginald. Your willingness to share our pressure is much appreciated. Our clan will certainly remember this favor and hold your people in higher regard."

The Cross Clan was undoubtedly placing a bet on the Larkinson Clan, but Ves didn't mind. Their relationship would certainly grow closer as long as they were able to survive this disaster.

Seeing that Patriarch Reginald made such a reckless but potentially rewarding choice, Marshal Ariadne could not continue to stall for time.

She needed to make a split-second choice while taking various interests into account. She not only needed to choose what was best for Gloriana, the Wodin Dynasty and the Hexadric Hegemony, but also her own troops.

"The Glory Seekers are Hexers." The older woman said with a sardonic smile. "We have never shirked our duty. Our people have fought and died against plenty of overwhelmingly powerful opponents in the Komodo War. We are no strangers to fighting against impossible odds."

"Thank you, Marshal." Ves sincerely expressed his thanks. "The assistance of your troops is much appreciated. I owe you a favor as well. I am quite aware that I've been dragging you into a danger of my own making once again. Strictly speaking, you don't need to help my clan, but your willingness to do so warms my heart. I will definitely repay my debt to you both!"

The two allies acted quickly now that their leaders gave their word. The ranged mechs of the Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan opened fire at the distant enemy.

Their entry into this heavily lopsided battle not only raised the morale of the Larkinsons, but also gave everyone a greater illusion that they might be able to fight their way out of this crisis!

As for the mechs deployed by the mercenaries, they distinctly distanced themselves from the Golden Skull Alliance. While the mercenary vessels still matched the pace and heading of the expeditionary fleet, their current pattern of behavior made it clear that they would not do anything to hinder the dwarven ace mech from completing its objective!

Whether the addition of the Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan made any difference, Ves didn't know. All he could do was to hope that the additional weight of fire would cause the Olympus Mons to crumble before it reached its objective.

While the Golden Skull Alliance did its best to chip away at the defenses of the enemy ace mech, the emergency meeting moved on to analysing its combat capabilities.

Ves briefly smiled. "Our intelligence analysts have gathered additional data on the Olympus Mons, most of which is public but some of it is not as obvious."

He projected rare footage of the Olympus Mons back when it was still in service in the Uriborn Province.

As an aggressive state, the Vulcan Empire loved its parades. It frequently used these events to strengthen the national pride of the dwarves and reinforce their sense of superiority over the tall folk.

Ves displayed a short clip that had been recorded more than a decade ago where the Olympus Mons demonstrated the might of an ace mech in front of an audience of high-ranking provincial dignitaries.

The distinctive rust red coating of the Olympus Mons was instantly recognizable. The larger-than-average dwarven mech wielded an enormous, two-handed maul as it flew towards a fleet carrier.

The capital ship was only 1.9 kilometers long and was built in the early days of the Vulcan Empire. By the time of the recording, the dwarven fleet carrier was already hopelessly out of date.

Though the decommissioned military vessel could have been sold to the private sector for a lot of hammers, the grand regent decided to employ it for a more worthwhile purpose.

Saint Yila Mayorka resonated with her powerful ace mech. Her strong and unique bond with her partner machine allowed them both to evoke a much stronger version of true resonance.

An entire sphere around the ace mech became enveloped with light and pressure, causing the audience of provincial officials to gasp!

The Olympus Mons raised its hammer. Though the heavy maul looked large enough to smash any mech to pieces, it was still hopelessly small compared to the size of a 1.9 kilometer long fleet carrier!

Yet as the famed Mountain Hammer kept resonating more and more with her mech, this enormous hammer began to glow brighter and brighter in orange until a large energy manifestation ballooned from the physical weapon!

Soon, an enormous orange energy hammer had emerged above the Olympus Mons! The weapon stretched for over a kilometer long and looked far more threatening and powerful than any of the energy manifestations evoked by the Larkinson Clan's battle formation!

"SHIPBREAK STRIKE."

The giant orange hammer struck the fleet carrier, transferring an enormous amount of kinetic energy and creating an impact that was no less than getting rammed by another capital ship!

The entire fleet carrier's side not only caved in, but the rest of her strong and sturdy metal hull cracked and shattered as if she was a broken vase!

Tons of metal debris flung out in each direction as the broken, bent and utterly ruined hull of a military capital ship drifted away from the Olympus Mons.

At the time, this display was explicitly meant to reinforce the power of the grand regent over the provincial governors.

Now, it gave the leaders of the Golden Skull Alliance a pretty good impression that nothing in their arsenal could withstand the dwarven ace mech's mountain blows!

Chapter 3340: Mustering Courage

Commander Melkor did not know much about what Ves and the leaders of the Golden Skull Alliance were talking about, but evidently they were actually thinking about fighting an ace mech!

This was an incredibly dangerous course of action, though the sudden appearance of a powerful Vulcanite mech did not signal good tidings for the expeditionary fleet.

If they did nothing, they were liable to get destroyed anyway. The Larkinsons were proactive by nature and did not like to place their destiny in other people's hands.

Instead of kneeling in front of a dwarven enemy and begging for mercy, Melkor and many other Larkinson soldiers would rather keep their backs straight and resist their inevitable doom!

Against a threat that was more overwhelming than anything that Melkor had confronted up until now, his pride, dignity and responsibility as a leader did not allow him to falter!

"We have beaten warships. We have beaten dark gods. We have beaten professional mech militaries. An ace mech is not much stronger in comparison! The good news is that it is alone. Don't worry about anything else. Just summon up your courage and do your best to wear down its defenses. As individuals, we are not a match against an ace mech. Together, even Saints can fall at our hand! For the clan!"

"FOR THE CLAN!"

"Ranged mech companies, invoke the Illustrious One! It looks like the enemy ace mech is burdened by the need to defend its mothership, so do not worry about missing!"

Ever since the Avatars of Myth developed their own crooked method of activating a battle formation, they had developed it further.

First, they were only able to invoke the Golden Cat. She was the easiest design spirit to invoke as every Larkinson was already bonded to her by definition. If that wasn't enough, the Bright Warriors they piloted also carried her presence.

The Golden Cat's greatest boons were her effect on morale and her ability to allow for a certain degree of skill sharing. This had many useful applications and was adaptable in many situations.

Melkor knew that this was not enough, though. There were many more design spirits at the Larkinson Clan's disposal and several possessed strong and distinct specialties that synergized better with certain roles.

Since invoking specific design spirits was not only challenging, but also depended a lot on alignment and fit, an Avatar mech pilot could not call upon any of them. It just wasn't doable.

For this reason, Melkor and his staff decided to give his mech pilots the choice to specialize in invoking only a couple of them at most. Spreading themselves too thin would do them little good. It was much better for the Avatars to spend their time deepening their understanding and connection to the most useful and compatible design spirits.

Knight mech pilots specialized in invoking Qilanxo, which fit their inclinations extremely well most of the time.

Lancer mech pilots did not have a clear choice at the moment, so their choices were largely based on preference and fit. Some chose to invoke Lufa in order to clear their minds of any distractions. Others chose Qilanxo in order to increase their odds of survival upon the dangerous moment of impact. A few even threw themselves onto Bravo!

The ranged mech pilots of the Avatars of Myth all settled for the Illustrious One. Since none of the Bright Warriors were armed with gauss rifles or other physical weapons at the moment, there weren't any other viable alternatives at the moment.

It was not easy to get started with the Illustrious One. It was an entity modeled after a sentient alien race that was quite weird to say the least.

The Avatars who chose to bond with the Illustrious One persisted, though. They only needed to rewatch the footage of the Amaranto in action in order to remind themselves what they were working towards!

Since the Amaranto demonstrated the strength and potential of the Illustrious One most clearly, the Avatars benefited from an excellent model to base their own approaches.

Enough time had passed since the Battle of Fordilla Zentra for the bulk of the ranged mech specialists to get their foot through the door.

Each of the mech pilots in question clutched the luminar crystal medallions hanging on their necks. After centering their thoughts and doing their best to reach out to that unfathomable blinding existence, their eyes shone a bit as they experienced the majesty of an entity that was much stronger than they could ever hope to become.

"Please, allow us to borrow your strength!"

The Illustrious One answered their pleas. Though the help he could provide was limited due to the limited bandwidth of the rudimentary connections, he was still able to do enough to give the Avatar mech pilots a little push!

"Load light beam attack phase crystals!"

The Larkinson Clan had a lot more luminar crystal rifles at its disposal this time. The clan prioritized its production after confirming its incredible effectiveness in the previous battle.

The overall damage output of the ranged mechs had increased by at least 20 percent on average, but that was not the most valuable gain from this upgrade program.

The inclusion of multiple attack modes including the ability to fire light beams was a crucial advantage! Making it standard issue for this unique weapon system was meant to give the Larkinson Army a lot more teeth against expert mechs!

"Since these light beams work so well in stripping the resonance shields of expert mechs, it should be effective in this case as well! Bombard the ace mech with light beams! We'll peel back its fancy shell no matter what it takes! If a thousand beams isn't enough, then we'll flood it with a million beams. If a million isn't enough, then let's try a billion!"

The weight of fire from the Larkinson Clan was formidable. The Avatar ranged mechs were more eye-catching than most. Each of them glowed and their crystal rifles also began to glow in rainbow colors, allowing them to output more damage at marginally greater precision.

The other legions of the Larkinson Army did not slack off, though. The Battle Criers fought with gusto and the Living Sentinels fired their rifles in volleys in order to maintain a consistent pace.

Of course, the absolute leader among them was the Amaranto. Huddled safely behind a purpose-built defensive enclosure on the exterior hull of the Graveyard, the masterwork rifleman mech fired one high-powered shot after another.

Venerable Stark did not pace herself because the Olympus Mons was too formidable of an opponent.

It was no use conserving her reserves against a single opponent. It was better for her to front-load most of her damage so that the dwarven ace mech would be in a weaker state if it reached the expeditionary fleet.

"The Olympus Mons... is like a mountain looming closer over our heads." She gritted her teeth as she experienced the horror of Saint Yila Mayorka to a much greater degree than other mech pilots.

In fact, every other expert pilot was also able to sense the enemy ace pilot's oppressive will from afar. The Mountain Hammer was just that strong, and it did not help that she directed her hostility towards the Larkinsons!

That last part was potentially fatal! The extraordinary willpower of an ace pilot was much heavier and more condensed than an expert pilot.

Once an enemy entered the range of a domain field, they needed to do their best to retain their own sense of identity and pride. As long as mech pilots began to falter, it was all over for them at that point.

If any mech pilot wanted to achieve greatness one day, they had to show enough courage and resilience under pressure to maintain their wits in these circumstances.

No Larkinson mech pilot wanted to crumble for this reason! Along with duty, ambition drove them to resist as much as possible! As long as they passed this hurdle, they would come out as better warriors than before!

The minutes passed by as the tension continued to rise. The mercenary mechs had already distanced themselves from the expeditionary fleet by at least 10,000 kilometers and showed no sign of supporting the desperate resistance effort against the approaching ace mech.

It was all up to the ranged mechs of the Larkinson Clan, the Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan.

For a long time, only beam weapons fired at the distant opponent. It was only when the ace mech came closer that the mechs armed with gauss rifles started to fire their hefty weapons.

At first, their hit rates were fairly low. It was much harder to ensure a tight spread, but as the ace mech continued to catch up to the fleeing expeditionary fleet, it became easier and easier to hit the target.

The Olympus Mons was like a moving mountain. It flew in front of the unknown dwarven frigate and projected its glowing domain field around the entire vessel to protect her from damage.

So far, it appeared that the ace mech's domain field was just as strong as the beginning! Despite all of the beams and projectiles pouring the will-infused energy field, the expeditionary forces slowly began to lose confidence as they perceived their attacks achieved no noticeable progress.

"Did we even drop its defenses by a single percent?"

"It's as if we're punching a mountain. Attacking it will only break our fists in vain!"

"We're like flies buzzing around a giant!"

"Shut up! Stop damaging people's morale and keep shooting. Whether we're achieving something or not, we don't have any other choice!"

The heroic effort to resist the advance of an ace mech began to look increasingly more like an impending tragedy.

At 50,000 kilometers, the Olympus Mons caused everyone to feel as if they were staring at an avalanche from below.

At 20,000 kilometers, the Olympus Mons pressed onto the mech pilots as if they were standing on a heavy gravity planet.

At 10,000 kilometers, the Olympus Mons made it seem as if a moon was falling right onto their heads!

Every individual experienced the escalating pressure differently.

For example, other than the expert pilots, the best ones off were the MTA mech pilot embedded in the Larkinson Army.

If the situation wasn't so dire, Jessica Quentin felt close to losing her composure. She had thought that the Battle of Fordilla Zentra was the last time the Larkinson Clan stupidly provoked a powerful enemy.

It appeared her optimism was misplaced!

"I think I understand now why so many mech pilots broke through in the Larkinson Clan." She wheezed. "Their patriarch of theirs just can't stop entering one crisis after another!"

The Olympus Mons came closer without anyone able to stop its advance. Many ranged mechs had overheated to a dangerous degree or had to return to their carriers in order to replenish their ammunition or supplies.

Yet despite throwing out enough ordnance to destroy many dwarven capital ships, the Olympus Mons showed an ability to resist and negate damage that far surpassed any second-class capital ship!

Ves looked sick as he observed the unstoppable advance of the Olympus Mons. The combined firepower of the Golden Skull Alliance, including that of the Amaranto, achieved little aside from making Saint Mayorka breathe a little deeper!

"If ace mechs are this powerful... then I can't imagine how effective god mechs truly are. It's no wonder that people say that god mechs can pummel any CFA battleship. The degree in which they can distort reality in their favor is even more powerful than what is happening in front of my fleet!"

He thought that expert mechs were already unreasonable for being able to resist a lot of material damage, but at least they had to pay attention to the light beam attacks of his luminar crystal rifles.

However, against the defenses of an ace mech, this weapon system did not attain any advantages. The luminar crystal rifles might as well be oversized flashlights as far as the Olympus Mons was concerned.

"Watch out! It's activating a ranged weapon system!"

A machine gun module poked out of the chest of the Olympus Mons and fired a rapid burst of 200 rounds in the span of a couple of seconds.

These small, glowing rounds streaked across space at a stupendous velocity and shredded an entire mech company of Avatar mechs into pieces!

Even though the rounds were so small, the force they delivered upon impact was as powerful as a heavy hammer strike!

With every Bright Warrior mech struck by multiple rounds, their armor simply didn't stand a chance. The machines shattered and the cockpits inside their chests broke as well!

"No!"

The Avatar mech pilots inside did not even have the time to eject. The Larkinsons suffered their first casualties!