

Mech 3341

Chapter 3341: Alpha Strike

On a standard mech, the machine gun module mounted on its chest hardpoint would have been classified as a light or ultralight weapon system.

Enemy mechs wouldn't have taken such a small and weak weapon seriously. Its rounds were too light and the firing mechanism could not propel them forward at impressive speeds.

The chances that a small machine gun module could penetrate the armor of a mech was practically minimal. The only chances they could inflict meaningful damage was if they struck the internals of a mech, but more powerful weapons could do that job even better!

One of the few advantages of a light machine gun weapon system was that it took up minimal capacity. The requirements were low and their small caliber allowed a mech to carry a lot of ammunition. Their firing rate could also be high.

This made them suitable for attacking lighter targets at a distance. They excelled at clearing infantry, shuttles and unreinforced structures.

Ves had never seen a humble light machine gun hardpoint wipe out an entire mech company within seconds!

The horrible rust red-coated ace mech had demonstrated its overwhelming power advantage by launching its first attack on the expeditionary fleet.

"How many rounds does it have?"

In his tentative judgement, the Olympus Mons shouldn't be stuffed with them. It was primarily a melee mech, so its ranged weapon modules were mostly meant to swat flies from afar or intercept incoming ordnance. It was unrealistic to conclude that this small but formidable machine gun was stocked with enough ammunition to shred every mech of the expeditionary fleet!

"What if... the Olympus Mons is equipped with a dimensional magazine?"

Dimensional storage containers existed but were prohibitively expensive. They usually didn't show up in second-class mechs in a more resource-poor region like the galactic rim, but there were always exceptions.

The design budgets of ace mechs were much more exaggerated than that of expert mechs. If a state wanted to provide an ace pilot with the absolute best it could afford to

spend upon, investing in a dimensional magazine and other applications of high technology made a lot more sense!

Ves felt a chill running through his body. The Olympus Mons was clearly unbeatable at close range, but if it was able to employ its auxiliary weapon module to annihilate entire mech armies at a distance, then the Larkinson mechs were already in the killing zone!

The Mountain Hammer appeared to be taking her time, though. The machine gun module never spat any further rounds, but its mere existence practically doubled the dwarven ace mech's oppression!

"Keep firing! Avenge the fallen and don't let this ace pilot think it can shoot at us with impunity!"

Now that it had entered into true fighting range, the resistance had intensified as every mech pilot was cognizant that they didn't have much time left before their fleet came under threat.

However, despite not excelling at range combat, the Olympus Mons already possessed the capacity to threaten the ships of the expeditionary fleet.

After unveiling its light machine gun, a plasma turret unfolded from its left shoulder. The larger weapon system charged up for a few seconds before releasing a bright plasma lance that struck one of the combat carriers of the Cross Clan!

"The Hiphayel Runt has been struck! She's suffered a massive hull breach!"

"The ship has lost power! She's drifting away!"

This wasn't all. The plasma turret slowly charged up and fired once rapid plasma lance every dozen seconds or so. Each strike vaporized right through the armored hulls of the combat carriers and struck the engineering bay. If their power generators or propulsion systems hadn't been melted to bits, the catastrophic damage the ships suffered was enough to put them out of commission anyway!

A lot of people were horrified at the ranged capabilities of the Olympus Mons.

They all understood that if they faced a ranged ace mech, they probably would have already died from the beginning! The mere thought of facing a superpowered version of the Amaranto was enough to collapse all thoughts of resistance!

"This isn't much better, though." Ves grumbled.

"Meowww!" Lucky nodded as his metallic body shivered as he clung to the Unending Regalia.

The Olympus Mons generated an increasing amount of despair among the people in the fleet. The dwarven ace mech's secondary weapon systems were already so formidable. Once it came close enough to employ its heavy maul, the power and lethality of its attacks would probably multiply by a hundred times!

Ves couldn't even think of dispatching expert mechs like the Riot or the First Sword to contend with this monstrous machine.

"I've managed to uncover additional information through my contacts in the mech industry." Professor Benedict's projection said. "The Vulcan Empire's mech industry is quite impressive for its age, but it is clear that its native Masters are not good enough to design an ace mech of this caliber. According to the information I've obtained, the Olympus Mons is actually designed by a team led by an experienced dwarven Master Mech Designer from the galactic heartland. Even though he is not a Vulcanite, the Master volunteered his services to assist the Vulcan Empire."

That explained much. Ves shared the same suspicions as well. Even if the Masters of the Vulcan Empire did their utmost, it was too difficult for them to design a mech this high-end.

"Dwarves stick together." Ves observed. "The Vulcan Empire disgusts a lot of humans but also inspires a lot of dwarves throughout the galaxy. Even if these foreign dwarves live too far away to relocate to this star sector, they can still provide a lot of funding and technical assistance by remote. That's one of the biggest reasons why this state expanded so quickly."

Even though dwarves were a minority group in human space, a huge amount of them were still scattered across the galaxy. Even though many of them were poor miners or average citizens in their respective states, there were always geniuses and lucky bastards among them who had achieved much greater success than others.

One of the success factors of the Vulcan Empire was that its dwarven population successfully managed to squeeze donations out of rich and powerful foreign dwarves. By appealing to their shared biological heritage, the Vulcanites became quite proficient in begging for handouts from powerful dwarves who were based in the galactic heartland or even the galactic center!

Otherwise, how else could a band of former mining slaves and a swarm of dwarven immigrants transform the Smiling Samuel Star Sector into a dwarven stronghold?

"What else did you find out?"

"The Olympus Mons is faster than you think." The Senior Mech Designer seriously explained. "It not only possesses a short-range boosting system, but also a medium-range cruising function. Aside from that, it is equipped with a powerful directional shield

generator, a foldable shield and axe, incredibly resilient ECM and interference shielding and can operate in multiple environments including underwater."

Ves grew dizzy from all of these features, and that was just the more basic capabilities of the dwarven ace mech!

"Do you know anything about the more extraordinary capabilities of the Olympus Mons?"

Professor Benedict responded with a brief smile. "These details are hard to come by. The Vulcan Empire guards those secrets carefully. From what I have discovered, the Olympus Mons is an ace mech that is designed to operate a domain field based around three central concepts: mass, physical force and hammers."

These were the laws or concepts that Saint Yila Mayorka based her battle method around. All of her attacks and techniques were physical and kinetic in a way that transcended ordinary limitations!

Ves just had to recall the short burst of machine gun fire the Olympus Mons had released to confirm that the ace mech was truly designed to hit as hard as possible.

"The Olympus Mons is attacking again!"

Though the Mountain Hammer did not appear to take her opposition seriously, she did not allow the Golden Skull Alliance to attack her ace mech with impunity.

With another burst of machine gun fire, a seemingly unending streak of glowing rounds tore through the hull of three Larkinson sub-capital ships at once!

"We can't wait any longer!" Ves stood up from his chair. "General Verle, commence our alpha strike."

"The range isn't optimal yet, sir. The Olympus Mons will see our mechs coming."

"That dwarven ace pilot is still underestimating us at the moment! There's a good chance she won't try her best, so let's strike before she changes her mind."

The Larkinson Army finally made its big move. For the first time, it employed all of its battle formations at the same time!

The melee mechs moved first. Venerable Joshua had even hopped into the cockpit of a customized Valkyrie Brunhild mech to play a role. Though it was much worse than his Valkyrie Prime, he had no other choice at the moment.

He felt more vulnerable than ever, but that did not stop him from participating in this high-risk attack maneuver.

"It doesn't matter if I pilot a regular mech, a prime mech or an expert mech. My chances of surviving against an ace mech is equally low in all three instances!"

With the Valkyrie Brunhild leading a large formation of Penitent Sister mechs, their mech pilots steadily began to reach out to the Superior Mother.

Approaching from another angle was a smaller but more sharper formation of Swordmaiden mechs.

Led by the First Sword, Venerable Dise had the illusion that she was thrown right back onto the battlefield of Aeon Corona VII.

Back then, Venerable Foster and her regenerating expert mech proved to be the bane of her sisterhood.

"I will not let that happen again." Dise vowed as her expert mech gripped the Decapitator. "Sisters, let us pierce through this veil and slay this beast!"

The Battle Criers led by Captain Dietrich were more subdued but did not stray from their mission. They had a poor run as of late and it seemed that this time wouldn't be much better.

"We need to show our best. Even if we fall, our mech legion shall be remembered!"

In the rear, Commander Taon and the Eye of Ylvaine also stood ready. The Rod of Ylvaine was suspended right before the legion commander's artillery mech.

Though Commander Taon did not foresee much optimism ahead, he did not let that dictate his actions.

"Ylvaine, lend us the power to defy the future!"

Even though Saint Mayorka had to know what was coming, the Olympus Mons calmly allowed the advancing battle formations to approach unimpeded. General Verle was not inclined to look a gift horse in the mouth and commanded his units to action.

"Battle Criers, spread your wings!"

A massive energy projection in the form of Angel Wings appeared over the Battle Crier battle formation.

These pure and white wings made a powerful flap forward, causing it to separate and launch hundreds of mech-sized feathers forward!

Those feathers each exuded a glow that was capable of disrupting, suppressing and negating many different spiritual energy manifestations.

Once the feather volley reached the edge of the domain field of the Olympus Mons, the massive glowing barrier finally rippled!

"It's working!"

Unfortunately, the feathers didn't have enough power to pop the domain field outright. It was already good enough for this opening move to destabilize the ace mech's intimidatingly resilient defensive field.

"Penitent Sisters, show them how women fight!"

"You heard the general! Let this ace mech hear your roar!" Venerable Joshua cried!

The huge visage of the Superior Mother in her most womanly aspect emerged as well. The giant female projection thrust a finger forward, causing it to release a sharp and concentrated energy wave that thrust through the same spot that the Battle Criers had just attacked!

The domain field exhibited further damage as the remote poke seemed to have penetrated much further towards the Olympus Mons.

"Swordmaidens, thrusts your greatswords!"

A giant greatsword stabbed forward, causing it to pierce through the channel that had already been made. This time, the Sword of Lydia had almost penetrated close enough to hit the Olympus Mons.

Unfortunately, it was just short by a couple of dozen meters!

"Eye of Ylvaine, pass judgement on this dwarf!"

As hundreds of Transcendent Punishers began to align themselves to the Great Prophet at the same time, the large Rod of Ylvaine glowed increasingly more white as a large and vague energy silhouette of a stylized eye appeared in front.

This giant eye seemed to gaze at the secrets of the Olympus Mons. Once it discovered a weakness, the Transcendent Punishers all fired their weapons at once in specific orientations!

Some of the artillery attacks hit the field around the damaged zone. These strikes seemed to hit sensitive spots that further destabilized the domain field.

Other attacks ran straight through the tunnel excavated by earlier empowered attacks.

Whatever the case, the Olympus Mons had become more vulnerable than ever before!

"Venerable Stark, the time is now!" Ves shouted as his Worclaw energy started to drain from his body again!

Blinky had already transferred to the Amaranto. With the help of the Worclaw crystal embedded on his forehead, he channeled all of the incoming Worclaw energy onto the expert mech's exclusive crystal rifle.

The Amaranto fired a blindingly bright light beam! The thick and powerful beam instantly passed through the gap in the domain field and struck the Olympus Mons, dealing a mixture of extraordinary energy and kinetic damage!

As the brightness faded, everyone closely watched their feeds to see the result of the collective superattacks of the Larkinson.

"No..."

"It's... it's still alive!"

Ves looked ashen as they saw that the Olympus Mons had remained completely intact after all of that effort. Though the Larkinson Clan had made a valiant effort in breaking through the domain field, the ace mech's directional energy shield had managed to block the Amaranto's maximum power strike!

"Look! The domain field is already repairing itself!"

With just a single effort, Saint Yila Mayorka reversed all of the damage the Larkinsons had inflicted on it. Not even the storm of attacks launched by thousands of other ranged mechs had managed to get past the defenses of the Olympus Mons. Their impact was like a gust of wind as far as the powerful dwarven ace mech was concerned.

The ace pilot began to make her own move.

"Hammer Storm."

Hundreds of spinning hammer projections appeared in her domain field. They orbited around the ace mech and the frigate at increasingly greater velocities.

Though no opponent was currently close to this deadly hammer party, its appearance caused every melee mech pilot to lose confidence.

They instinctively knew that if they tried to close in, their machines would get smashed apart by one of those many spinning energy hammers!

Chapter 3342: Bloody Challenge

The massed ranged attacks of the entire Golden Skull Alliance failed to threaten the Olympus Mons in the slightest.

The alpha strike that combined all of the battle formations of the Larkinson Clan failed to do more than pierce a hole in the enemy ace mech's domain field.

Ves had even gone as far as to drain his body of much of the Worclaw energy he recovered in the past months to empower the Amaranto's super attack.

Yet even the masterwork mech's most powerful strike failed to get past the ace mech's extremely powerful technological energy shield!

With the huge amount of power an ace mech had at its disposal, just this defensive solution alone was enough to resist the attacks of thousands of regular mechs for a long time!

"And this is supposed to be an offensive mech..." Ves despairingly said as he collapsed back onto his seat.

Dwarves generally designed and built their mechs to be tough, but this was ridiculous!

Mrow...

Blinky tiredly returned to his mind as he was reduced to an exhausted and diminished state. The spiritual cat definitely couldn't put up any further fight in this condition!

He wasn't the only one who was no longer in a state to fight. Many Larkinsons, Glory Seekers and Crossers were finally starting to crumble. Morale sank throughout the fleet as no one saw any hope of victory anymore.

Even if they expended a huge amount of effort to overcome the ace mech's powerful domain field, what then?

It still possessed a powerful energy shield that was far more impressive than anything a regular mech or expert mech typically possessed!

Then there was the physical armor of the Olympus Mons itself. As an ace mech, the exotics used to form its armor plating had to consist of an extravagantly expensive mix. Such defenses couldn't be overcome quickly, especially if it was designed to resist attacks from other ace mechs!

No one thought they had any chance of overcoming the stupendously powerful defensive layers of this dwarven technological monstrosity.

Not even Patriarch Reginald thought his Bolvar Rage could make a significant dent! If his hybrid expert mech kept its distance, then its varied weapon systems simply wouldn't overcome the defences of this supermachine.

If the Bolvar Rage tried to get close to launch strikes with its axe, then those spinning hammers would either crack or push out the expert mech without giving it a chance to reach its target!

"If my father's ace mech was this good, he would have survived the treacherous ambush that led to his death."

Saint Yila Mayorka and her powerful ace mech certainly deserved to be part of the grand regent honor guard once!

The powerful and technically superior dwarven machine could practically foil any assassination attempt, whether it was launched by a swarm of mechs, a squad of rogue expert mechs or even a bomb planted at a public site!

The reality-defying capabilities of a fully-equipped ace mech were just that potent.

Patriarch Reginald ached to grasp this level of strength more than ever. Even as he admitted his inferiority in front of Saint Yila Mayorka, he yearned to reach and exceed her more than ever in this intense moment.

Just the proximity to the Mountain Hammer's heavy and oppressive will was enough for him to feel his limits loosening!

In fact, many mech pilots grew a little more mad while they stared right at their doom!

Though thousands if not tens of thousands of mech pilots had already given in to their despair, the most firm, desperate and courageous mech pilots all tried their best to maintain their fighting posture until the end.

Seeds bloomed in their hearts as each of them vowed to grow strong enough to smack this overwhelming threat aside.

Others wished to surpass Saint Mayorka so that they would never be on the receiving end of this treatment again!

"Come on! I'm not afraid of you! You think those spinning hammers scare me? I'll break each and every one of them! Even if I'm an ant in your eyes, I'm still taller than you, dwarf!"

It didn't appear that Saint Mayorka was paying attention to the mewling cries of the weak and pathetic humans.

Their resistance was quaint, but ultimately futile.

The Olympus Mons didn't make haste to wipe out the human mechs and ships before it. Saint Yila Mayorka continued her steady advance while making sure her domain field covered the frigate flying close behind her ace mech.

"Should we split up?" Ves asked. "Since the Olympus Mons is being restrained by the need to protect its mothership, it should not be able to chase hundreds of different ships that are flying in every direction."

General Verle shook his head. "We will lose our ability to combine our strengths and coordinate our assets. Besides, with the ranged capabilities demonstrated by the Olympus Mons, it can already shoot all of our mechs and ships down."

"What's the right decision, then?"

"..."

There were no good answers now. The Larkinsons and its allies had already emptied their entire bag of tricks.

In the face of absolute power, all of the trump cards that the Larkinson Clan was so proud of turned out to be nothing but gimmicks and parlor tricks in front of an actual ace mech!

As Ves tried to rack his mind to figure out if he could squeeze one more means of attack that might actually work, he received an emergency call from one of his advisors.

"Patriarch!" Minister Shederin urgently addresses him with an uncharacteristically raised voice. "Our clan needs to cease our attacks! We are not forming the correct response to the enemy's challenge!"

"What...?"

"With the attack methods demonstrated by this ace mech, Saint Mayorka clearly possesses the power to wipe our entire fleet from existence. However, it has only fired its machine gun and its plasma turret for a short amount of time. Don't you think that is suspicious? According to my behavioral analysis, our opposition isn't seeking to destroy us. I've studied Saint Mayorka, and she is a consummate professional soldier who is also dedicated to serving on behalf of the dwarven people. She isn't the type of mech pilot who revels in our despair or wishes to prolong our agony."

Ves frowned as he thought about this issue. "The only reason why the Saint isn't doing her best is if she or her ace mech are impaired or..."

"—if she is tasked with testing us." Minister Shederin finished. "I believe that the dwarves are probing us instead of destroying us. We have no choice but to play their game and seek to pass their challenge."

"Do you have a guess?" Ves asked.

"According to her record, Saint Mayorka is also a believer in Vulcan, though not a fanatical one. Much like many other older dwarves, she is much more dwarf-centric than obsessed with Vulcan. I predict that proving your connection to 'her' god may be the answer to Saint Mayorka's challenge."

"That... actually makes a lot of sense." Ves grew a bit looser. "I'm glad I have you around to think on my behalf. Who knows how long it would have taken for me to make this realization myself."

Shederin's projection responded with a brief bow. "I am at your disposal, sir. I suggest you act quickly. Saint Mayorka's patience should already be running thin."

Ves acted straight away. Even though he had just exhausted his mind and body due to his earlier stunt, he had yet to reach his limit.

"C'mon Blinky! Help me out for a moment here. I need as much juice as you can pump."

Mrowwww...

The purple cat did his best to push away his need for rest and began to channel additional spiritual energy.

Meanwhile, Ves reached out and grasped the Hammer of Brilliance. Unlike Ves, his incarnation was still in prime condition!

"C'mon, me-in-another-form. It's showtime."

Ves did not need to say anything further as Vulcan already shared many of his thoughts.

He began to do something weird. He tried to embody a design spirit that was technically an extension of himself.

He began to channel Vulcan in his mind and embody his incarnation!

A vast amount of power flowed in his mind! Some of it began to restore his exhausted reserves while the rest began to overflow his mind and body!

"This is different! We're much more compatible with each other!"

When Ves tried this trick with other design spirits like Ylvaine or the Golden Cat, he always had the feeling that he was trying to fit a cube in a spherical container.

This time, his incredibly high alignment with Vulcan caused this move to feel as if he was neatly slotting in a cube in a cube-shaped container. The pressure was much lower and he felt as if he could channel many of Vulcan's abilities!

Ves was highly aware that his state imposed a substantial burden on Vulcan, so he did not revel in it for too long.

Soon enough, an enormous energy manifestation of Vulcan appeared in front of the expeditionary fleet.

It was larger, more substantial and more convincing than when Ves projected his own image during the Battle of Fordilla Zentra.

Back then, Ves hadn't created his incarnation yet. Its existence this time made a powerful and substantial difference that increased the authenticity of his display!

With the glowing Hammer of Brilliance in hand, the energy manifestation that appeared in space stared directly at the Olympus Mons.

"It's... it's slowing down!"

"The Hammer Storm has disappeared!"

For the first time since they showed up, the ace mech and the dwarven frigate slowed their advance. Soon, they came to a relative stop a few kilometers away from Vulcan's projection.

"Look! The rear hatch of the dwarven frigate is opening up! Something is emerging!"

All of the members of the Golden Skull Alliance held their breath as they hoped this would be a turning point in this one-sided 'battle'.

The Olympus Mons turned around to remotely drag over a small object that the ship had ejected into space.

The object, which glowed with resonance, drifted over to the ace mech. Soon it stopped above the outstretched palm of the Olympus Mons.

"Is that... a flag?"

"It's a banner."

"It looks quite shabby. If it isn't protected by the domain field, it is liable to snap at any time."

"Wait a second. Isn't that the famed Banner of Vulcan that went missing a couple of decades ago?! Why is it here!?"

The Banner of Vulcan was credited with inspiring the early dwarven rebels to fight for their freedom. It was ostensibly crafted by Vulcan himself and represented the sacred and most holiest artifact of the Vulcan Faith!

It's supposed theft more than 20 years ago was one of the most painful tragedies of the Vulcan Empire until recently. It's absence led to a substantial loss of confidence in the Vulcan Faith and gave the Dwarven God Cult a golden opportunity to benefit from the traditional faith's misfortune!

Though many Larkinsons didn't think the Banner of Vulcan was anything more than a dusty historical relic, Ves knew differently.

"Isn't that... my own work?"

The massive energy projection of Vulcan stared straight at the banner that had absorbed the prayers of a huge amount of Vulcanites over a span of several decades.

Even when it went missing, trillions of Vulcanites still prayed to this renowned and impressive artifact!

Exposure to all of that dwarven spiritual energy changed the formerly weak totem in a profound way. It glowed in its own right as it concentrated an immense amount of spiritual energy, more than what the Hammer of Brilliance inherently possessed!

Ves could practically taste the age and weight of history of what he created during his last and most significant Mastery experience. He never thought he would be reunited with an object of his 'past' in this dire and desperate moment!

Shederin was right. This was a test. The dwarves hadn't set out to destroy the culprits who caused the Vulcan Empire to collapse. They just wanted to test whether Ves truly had any relations to Vulcan!

Of course, if the Larkinsons were unable to satisfy the dwarves, Saint Mayorka would have no qualms in squashing the humans who triggered a dwarven calamity!

Ves acted quickly once he realized all of this. He did not delay any further and prompted the giant energy manifestation to reach towards the Banner of Vulcan.

From the moment they touched, a sense of harmony overcame Ves.

There was no incompatibility or rejection. Though the Banner of Vulcan was a living totem that had grown far past its original state, it was still an artifact made by Ves in his guise as the dwarven god.

It recognized its creator!

Pure delight overcame Ves as he momentarily forgot about all of his existing concerns. His professional interests somehow rose up as he eagerly explored the exceptional condition of a living totem of his own creation.

The Banner of Vulcan had experienced more growth and evolution than all of his other totems put together!

"You're beautiful..." Ves said as his eyes shone with brilliance. "W-Wait! What are you doing with my banner!"

As Ves had become mesmerized by reuniting with his old work, to outside observers it was clear as day that the dwarven artifact and the projected image of a human Vulcan were related to each other!

The glows of the two seamlessly blended with each other. It was as if they were originally part of a greater whole.

That was all of the confirmation the powerful dwarves needed. The Olympus Mons drew back the Banner of Vulcan and guided it back through the rear hatch of the dwarven vessel.

Then, the ace mech fearlessly pointed to the giant Vulcan before motioning for it to enter the same ship.

"Is it... asking Vulcan to step aboard?"

"No you idiot... The dwarves don't want to send an illusion to their ship. They're inviting our patriarch to step inside!"

Chapter 3343: Humbling Realization

Throughout this entire farce of a battle, the enemy never took the Golden Skull Alliance seriously.

Over 10,000 mechs armed with ranged weapons did their best to flood the Olympus Mons with destructive firepower. They ranged from Bright Warriors armed with the new luminar crystal rifles to Eternal Redemptions whose ultra-heavy gauss cannons were meant to crack the defenses of extremely tough and powerful machines.

Yet what did they ultimately accomplish? Almost nothing!

The ace mech was like an umbrella that effortlessly withstood the incoming firepower like drops of rain. It gave out the impression that it could stand in the rain for days and not let a single drop pass through its cover. Its defense coefficient was so ridiculously high that not even a hundred expert mechs put together could compare!

Not even the much-anticipated alpha strike posed a significant threat to the dwarven ace mech. To see the most powerful offensive trump cards of the Larkinson Clan combine their awesome power in a coordinated fashion was an unforgettably grand experience, but the ultimate effect only poked a hole through just one of the ace mech's defensive layers!

The message conveyed by the famed Mountain Hammer of the Vulcan Empire was loud and clear. She and her ace mech could have easily crushed the entire Larkinson Army and the rest of the expeditionary fleet without ever coming close to defeat.

The power gap was just that vast.

Ves, who sat powerlessly on his observer's seat, chuckled helplessly as he took in the apparent defeat.

"I was too naive to think the Vulcan Empire was a pushover. I got too carried away with the thought that it is a flawed state that is rife with internal division. Its military is still strong and its crop of ace pilots are truly close to god-like in strength. My clan is far from contending against even a fraction of the power of a second-rate state."

A true second-rate state was enshrined by at least one ace pilot. Without such a powerful guardian, it was too vulnerable against other states that did enjoy the services of one. The extravagant combat power of an ace mech was enough to overrun any expert mech, and their soft power was also far-reaching.

If an ace mech was backing up a mech army, then the combination turned into an extremely powerful war machine that could either form an impenetrable wall or an unstoppable spear!

Aside from encountering opposing ace mechs, there were only a couple of ways for such an army to falter.

Ace mechs were powerful but extremely expensive and difficult to maintain. A lack of funding, resources and high-level expertise could easily cause these transcendent machines to degrade over time.

Ace pilots also had to be handled properly. They all fought for a specific reason. If they ever became displeased or disaffected by their employers, they might decide that they could no longer fight for a particular state or organization.

This happened quite a lot, especially when states morphed over time!

A typical example was when a formerly well-run state decayed into a corrupt and tyrannical state. Since ace pilots were typically soldiers who dedicated their entire lives to uphold certain ideals, it was difficult for them to tolerate serving a master that pursued the opposite.

The threat of driving away an ace pilot was one of the more subtle reasons why states rarely fell to this extent. Even the most selfish and decadent rulers knew they couldn't mess around too much!

Otherwise, their states would lose too many high-level protectors and only make them vulnerable to getting conquered by stronger rivals that had their affairs in order.

"I wonder why Saint Yila Mayorka has left the side of the grand regent." Ves frowned in thought. "The Vulcan Empire is burning all around her. The dwarven citizens need her more than ever. What motivation is strong enough to ignore her people's suffering and remain hidden in this obscure star system?"

He had a feeling that he would find out the answer soon enough, because he was about to meet with the opposing dwarves in person soon!

Ves slowly lifted himself from the observer's seat and began to move to the hangar bay.

Every clansman around him did not look happy at how the fighting came to a standstill. They were all aware that the only reason why they still existed was because the opposing Vulcanites allowed them to exist.

The fact of the matter was that the Larkinsons, Glory Seekers and Crossers were at the mercy of the dwarves. If the enemy ever changed its mind, the entire Golden Skull Alliance minus the evacuated civilians would all perish without a doubt!

The expeditionary ships halted their forward acceleration under the silent instruction of the Olympus Mons. The ace mech never took the initiative to communicate directly to the humans, but any soldier could easily interpret the powerful machine's standard military gestures.

While Ves made his way down the nearest hangar bay, he was quickly joined by a number of leaders and advisors.

"There is a high chance that the Vulcanites here belong to a different group or faction from the ones that we are familiar with." Minister Shederin provided his analysis as he walked while wearing a luxurious vacsuit. "Do not assume that the dwarves we're facing have sided with the central authority or the rebels. Their goals are likely at a higher level than the objectives pursued by more vulgar groups. That is likely why Saint Mayorka chose to be here. Since we are presumably meeting with a high-end group of Vulcanites, it is best if you allow me to accompany you and speak on your behalf."

Ves frowned. "I think the dwarves want to speak to the man who assumed the identity of Vulcan, not a stand-in puppet. Still, I would love to have you by my side. We'll see whether the dwarves will mind your presence."

Shederin was clearly a civilian and exuded the vibe of an officious dignitary. Ves was hoping to slip him into the inevitable meeting with the dwarves.

"You'll come with me as well, Lucky." Ves softly said while he reached out and petted the gem cat that was perched on his Unending Regalia. "If these dwarves insist that I should remain on board their ship as a guest, then... you know what to do. As long as you can neutralize the threat, anything goes."

"Meow." Lucky responded as he nervously swung his tail.

Even though the dwarven vessel was too small compared to the capital ships of the Larkinson Clan, Ves did not underestimate the danger she posed. Just the Olympus Mons hovering right outside was a massive hurdle that he needed to overcome before he could ever think about attempting an escape.

"The identity and motivations of this dwarven group is highly suspicious." Calabast's projection said. "We have been trying to decipher whatever clues we can find from analyzing the appearance of the dwarven frigate and the pattern of behavior shown so far. Although she doesn't look like it, the vessel is actually extremely high-end. What you see on the surface is definitely a form of misdirection."

It was difficult to make detailed scans of a ship that was under the protection of a domain field, but the Black Cats managed to make many observations and found out a couple of elements that didn't quite make sense.

This was not a cheap frigate-class starship, that was for sure!

Once they reached the shuttle, only Ves, his honor guard and Minister Shederin remained. There wasn't much of a point to bring anyone else. That would just endanger more Larkinsons.

"Let's go."

The shuttle slowly emerged in space and flew towards the ship where Ves, or Vulcan, was expected to enter.

The closer the shuttle flew to the other side, the more Ves and everyone else aboard the shuttle experienced the pressure exuded by the Olympus Mons.

The powerful will-infused domain of an ace pilot that was amplified by a compatible ace mech was much more horrible than the glow of any design spirit!

Ves realized that even if they were roughly existences at the same tier, their capabilities differed enormously!

A powerful ancestral spirit like the Superior Mother might be good at forming bonds with lots of Hexers or lending her power to certain mech pilots, but these were mostly assisting functions.

Ace pilots were different! As long as they were in their ace mechs, they excelled like no other at leveraging their immense power in direct combat! Their skills and abilities were fully geared towards winning battles in the material realm!

This was why the battle formations that Ves had previously been proud of worked so poorly against the ace mech.

A matchup between a design spirit and an ace pilot was like a contest between a city mayor and a trained soldier.

If the competition was about who could best perform an administrative function, then the mayor would likely win.

If the competition was about who could vanquish over the other in a fighting arena, then the soldier held absolute superiority!

"High-ranking mech pilots truly rank at the top when it comes to direct combat."

Ves sobered up as he sensed that some of his hubris had faded away from his mind. As of late, he had been focusing too much on leveraging the power of his design spirits.

His focus on developing his battle formations was a distortion of what mech combat should actually be. His design spirits shouldn't be doing the bulk of the fighting. That was not what they excelled at. Instead, they should continue to focus on facilitating the mech pilots who were truly needed to win battles!

Did that mean that he should stop employing his battle formations? No. Ves merely recognized that continuing his development on them would ultimately sidetrack him from achieving his goals.

Mech designer creed was that their profession existed to serve mech pilots.

It was not his job to diminish or replace the role of mechs and mech pilots.

The original reason why he employed design spirits in the first place was because he thought they could assist the users of his products even more!

Ves needed this humbling reminder. He just wished it didn't come in such a painful way.

When the shuttle crossed into the Saint Kingdom of the Olympus Mons, everyone aboard the shuttle felt as if they had entered the territory of an apex predator.

One that was not only aware of its prey, but also harbored clear hostility towards the entrants!

Even someone who was as spiritually dull as Minister Shederin was able to read Saint Mayorka's undisguised hostility.

"We have stepped onto the web of a watchful spider." The old diplomat said as his body shook under his vacsuit. "I have met presidents and cabinet ministers under the protection of other ace pilots before. I can tell you that they are constantly 'watching'. Nothing happens without their awareness."

Ves grew concerned. "Can they read minds?"

"I... cannot answer that. They can likely read what people are thinking or feeling to varying degrees depending on the individual strength and power of the ace pilot in question. Some are better at reading people than others. All of them can sense hostility and danger, though, as that is what they are most accustomed to anticipating in battle. You should not think of attacking our hosts."

"Heh, I've already figured that out. I'm not stupid to think I can turn the tables."

This was one of the few situations where Ves felt truly powerless!

Unless Saint Mayorka ever took a break and exited the cockpit of the Olympus Mons, Ves could not let down his guard for a single second!

He needed to temper his behavior and make sure he did not act suspiciously in any way. He wouldn't even be able to get away with drawing his Amastendira!

The shuttle transmitted a soft bump.

"We've arrived, sir."

Ves let out a deep and nervous breath... "Let's hope the dwarves are generous enough to look past my previous deeds."

Chapter 3344: Admission

The small hangar bay of the unknown dwarven frigate was clean and largely empty. There was no dwarf in sight and Ves was not able to glean a lot of relevant clues.

"It looks like Calabast is right." Ves concluded.

The tools, parts and the overall quality of the interior construction were all high-end. The ship was built with Vulcanite design principles in mind, but everything looked a lot more expensive and high-performing than typical.

There was a distinct lack of decorations, though. The overall look of the interior of the frigate was devoid of needless decorations and symbols. The deck and bulkheads were left uncoated, allowing Ves to get a clear glimpse at the spotless clean gunmetal grey alloys.

Of course, this was just the hangar bay and did not reflect what the rest of the starship was like.

Whoever was in charge didn't appear to care about grandeur as much as other powerful Vulcanites. That was strange because many dwarven leaders had a tendency to overcompensate by displaying their wealth and power in an ostentatious manner.

This did not appear to be the case this time. Ves increasingly became certain that he was dealing with a different breed of dwarf.

When he lifted up his weary body from his seat and exit his shuttle, he was quickly met with another setback.

"Meow!"

Lucky flung away from Ves' armored shoulder. The gem cat looked confused and tried to fly through the hatch, only to flatten himself against an invisible wall!

"Sir, our way out is blocked. We can't get through." Nitaa said in a concerned and distressed tone.

The tall bodyguard wore a massive suit of heavy combat armor that could bulldoze through many obstacles. Yet even she couldn't get past the invisible barrier that prevented anyone else inside the shuttle to step aboard the dwarven frigate!

Minister Shederin frowned as even his frail and unarmed form got denied passage. "I was afraid of this. The owners of this vessel only extended a single invitation. It appears you must proceed on your own, patriarch."

Ves looked depressed. He was still dealing with the consequences of expending much of his Worclaw energy. How was he supposed to keep his head as sharp as possible in his upcoming talks with his 'hosts'?

"Meow meow."

Lucky waved his paw as if to say goodbye before curling up on a chair in order to catch a quick nap.

"Gee, thanks for the vote of confidence." Ves replied in a surly tone.

He was no stranger to confronting difficult situations by himself. He just didn't do it lately because he increasingly became used to acting like an actual patriarch.

This was a throwback to the past as far as he was concerned. Before he founded his clan and relied on his subordinates to take care of business, he regularly got his hands dirty.

Ves just had to place himself back to his past mindset where he did not lean on anyone to solve his immediate problems.

"I can do this." He softly said.

As he continued to step out of the shuttle unimpeded, he suddenly encountered another surprise.

"Urgh!" The gravity!

The artificial gravity set to the ship was much higher than Ves was accustomed to! According to the readings of the Unending Regalia, the artificial gravity was set as high as 4.6 g!

"My suit and I weigh almost five times heavier!"

Fortunately, Ves had anticipated such a problem beforehand. He just didn't expect the operators of this ship to dial the setting so high.

He mentally activated a command that caused the gravitic backpack mounted on the modular slot of the Unending Regalia to go active.

Although it was a high-end model, the gravitic backpack struggled to generate a local gravity field that offset the local gravity by 3.6 g, thereby restoring the weight of Ves and his gear to their normal levels.

Ves was too tired to resist excess gravity forces and he did not want his physical condition to drag down his thoughts any further.

He carefully strode forward. The shuttle behind him grew more distant until it disappeared from sight entirely as he passed through an empty corridor.

"Well, this ship offers a generous amount of ceiling height for a dwarven vessel." He muttered.

The ceiling was actually lower than what it should be compared to the interior of a human starship. Nitaa, who was already tall, would have to permanently bow down her

body if she attempted to pass through this hallway while wearing her powered combat armor!

Initially, Ves wasn't sure where he should move. He still hadn't encountered a single crew member. The dwarves hadn't even dispatched a bot that could lead the way.

"Okay, this is clearly not the right direction."

He soon found out that he could only follow a single route. If he attempted to walk in the wrong direction, his armored body would bump into an invisible barrier that was impassable with his level of strength!

Ves could already tell that these walls were generated by Saint Mayorka. Ves was fully in the scope of her Saint Kingdom. Perhaps mechs might be able to employ enough brute force to overcome this resistance, but infantry could forget about escaping from the clutches of an active ace mech!

"Ace pilots make too much of a difference."

The more he experienced the overwhelming power of an ace pilot, the more he yearned to gain the services of one himself!

Unfortunately, none of the expert pilots of his clan came close to reaching the next level. It would take decades for them to develop their resonance strength and further flesh out their convictions.

"It looks like I will have to lay low in the Red Ocean for a long time until then. My clan can't confront any power that enjoys the protection of an ace pilot!"

This single incident had taught Ves and the rest of the Golden Skull Alliance a lot of crucial lessons. Until they were able to harness the power of an ace mech like the Olympus Mons for themselves, they could forget about exploring the Red Ocean without worry!

First he needed to make sure to pass the immediate hurdle. There was no guarantee that the dwarves would let 'Vulcan' off today!

His boots clanked against the deck until he apparently reached his destination. A frigate was not a large ship class, and their overall layout generally followed the same template, so he had a good idea of the compartment he was about to enter.

A large blast door slowly slid open, allowing him to glimpse some sort of ceremonial hall that was set up as a spartan seat of power.

The bare metal deck and bulkheads were slightly more spruced up than usual. Banners related to the Vulcan Empire hung from above while various symbolic markings had been painted on the deck.

This was the first time he encountered actual dwarves.

A procession of dwarven guards equipped with the Vulcanite version of heavy combat armor stood at the sides of the hall.

The bulky black equipment that caused them to look like oversized metal dwarves were coated in black. Their decorative golden flourishes added both a ceremonial and martial look to them. The heavy rifles and other armaments were both heavy and powerful in a way that few elite infantry units could match.

"Praetorian Guard."

They were the best of the best in the Vulcan Empire. Every dwarven infantry soldier aspired to join the elite bodyguard unit that was considered to be good enough to protect the grand regent of the Vulcan Empire!

Why were they here? What was the reason why the most elite and honored soldiers of the central government chose to leave their posts and hole themselves up in this obscure but extremely well-built dwarven starship for at least a decade?

[STEP CLOSER.] An electronic voice boomed up ahead.

Ves quivered a bit inside his Unending Regalia. The cadence and force behind this distorted voice could only come from a genuine leader who knew his way around with power.

The deck softly clanked as Ves strode past a corridor formed out of a score of heavily armed guards in black. The helmeted guards did not move or show any visible reaction to the passage of a tall folk.

The worst part about this was that Ves couldn't even extend his spiritual senses to get an impression of other people's emotions and spirits! The oppressive domain field that Saint Mayorka constantly maintained with the help of her ace mech was saturating the surrounding space with her powerful presence. It acted as a form of interference that caused Ves' formidable Spirituality to remain confined in his body.

Blinky wasn't even able to exit his mind due to this oppressive atmosphere!

Ves eventually stopped in front of a set of broad, metal steps. They slowly led up to a massive metal throne that was fabricated with the sharp, angular style of the Vulcanites.

It was a piece of art in itself. The armrest and backrest was shaped to depict numerous hammers, mechs, and dwarves. If Ves had the time to appreciate this throne, he would have recognized that it depicted the origin story of the dwarven rebellion!

Unfortunately for him, one big form blocked his view of a third of the massive throne.

A large and heavy metallic form sat on the throne like a tyrant who knew he was in charge. The armor of the apparent dwarven leader was surprisingly plain. It was a rather sober work of clean and uncoated metal that was shaped to form a functional set of armor.

Despite the lack of frills, its size, thickness and blockiness conveyed a sense of weight and authority that far outstripped any leader that Ves had met in person! His Unending Regalia looked like a toy compared to this larger and taller dwarven suit of armor!

A familiar object rested between the legs of the giant metal dwarf. The Banner of Vulcan draped on the armored form as if it belonged there. Ves was able to sense that the dwarf was also able to harmonize with the aged and powerful artifact!

Ves had the illusion that there was no one in the Vulcan Empire that best represented its dwarven population than this armored figure resting on his throne!

[YOU ARE VES LARKINSON.]

"Correct." Ves simply replied.

[YOU ARE A MECH DESIGNER BY PROFESSION.]

"That is also correct. I am an independent Journeyman and lead my own mech company."

[YOU ARE THE PATRIARCH OF A CLAN.]

"A clan I've founded, actually."

The imperious metal facemask of the giant metal dwarven armor remained unmoving as its wearer scrutinized Ves.

[YOU ARE VULCAN.]

The critical moment had come. Ves knew he had to respond carefully lest he sicced the Praetorian Guard on himself!

He carefully removed his Hammer of Brilliance from his external toolbelt and clutched it with his gauntlet. He stretched it forward, allowing its glow to echo with the more aged and developed aura of the Banner of Vulcan.

It was like comparing the same wine from a different vintage! The newer bottle was fresh and light while the older one was thick and heavy.

Despite their differences, both wines still shared enough traits to make it clear that they shared the same origin!

"I... am." Ves answered as he channeled his incarnation to a small extent. His aura instantly altered in character. "I am Vulcan."

Saint Mayorka and anyone else who was discerning enough should be able to read the truth from his statement. No matter how absurd it sounded, Ves knew he had no choice but to admit this secret. He was in someone else's turf right now and he held no power to deny anyone's requests!

A long and disconcerting moment of silence passed. Ves grew shaky as his massive and impactful admission of truth failed to generate any response from the armored dwarves.

Neither Saint Mayorka, the Praetorian Guard, nor this big armored figure showed any apparent response!

Ves couldn't take it any longer.

"Excuse me, sir, but... may I know who I am speaking to?" He tentatively asked.

The dwarf on the throne finally reacted. The squarish, bulky metal armor slid from the throne and stood on two metal pillars. With the Banner of Vulcan gripped to the side, the heavy armored form slowly descended from the steps.

BOOM.

BOOM.

BOOM.

The armored figure was subjected to the full force of 4.6 g, which caused his boots to collide onto the steps like hammer blows.

Ves estimated that the entire suit of armor massed at least 1200 kilograms, which meant that the powered armor was currently hauling around a weight that was over 5 tons!

Once the dwarven leader reached the bottom of the steps, the armored suit still towered over Ves, and that was when he wore his Unending Regalia that added a bit of height to his own stature!

[I AM THE SOVEREIGN OF THE VULCAN EMPIRE.]

BOOM.

[I AM THE RULER OF THE VULCANITES.]

BOOM.

[I AM THE DWARF WHO EVERY OTHER DWARF MUST ANSWER TO.]

BOOM.

[I AM THE IRON EMPEROR.]

BOOM.

When the giant metal figure finally stopped right in front of Ves, the intimidating metal facemask slowly slid open, revealing a bald, dark-skinned dwarven head that looked strangely familiar.

Glowing, cybernetic yellow eyes stared down at Ves' thinner and shorter armored form.

"AND I AM THE ONE YOU SHOT IN THE HEAD."

"Rion." Ves gasped in utter shock!

How could he be alive all this time?!

Chapter 3345: A Strange Recollection

It all made sense.

The Vulcan Empire called itself an empire, yet strangely enough not a single dwarf had the guts to crown themselves as emperor.

Instead, the effective head of government settled for taking up the office of grand regent. This was a position that implied that the official was merely a stand-in for a true dwarven ruler.

In public, the Vulcanites explained that the reason for adopting such an unusual hierarchy was because the throne of the emperor was reserved for Rion Aaden, the legendary dwarven mech pilot and hero who not only served as a vessel for Vulcan, but also handed the dwarves their first and crucial victory!

Without Rion Aaden, the dwarven rebellion at Desala X could have never overwhelmed the guard force of House Kantis!

Without Rion Aaden, the dwarven people would have never been introduced to an inspiring and unifying god known as Vulcan!

Without Rion Aaden, the dwarves would have never been able to catch the attention of the MTA, thereby enabling the escaped slaves to start a movement that eventually concluded with the founding of a dwarven state!

Every single Vulcanite was raised with the founding myths of their state drilled into their ears. Though Vulcan was their god, Rion was the messiah who spread the deity's glory to the dwarves!

Yet as far as everyone was concerned, Rion Aaden, the legendary dwarven hero of the rebellion, died a heroic death shortly after the Desalan rebels succeeded in overcoming their human opponents.

The later stages of the rebellion did not involve Rion in the slightest. Many other dwarven heroes and visionaries rose up as the years went by and accomplished far greater feats than a poor mining slave who was barely able to pilot a mech.

Even Ves thought that he had managed to finish the job and leave no traces of his past involvement behind.

It turned out that he was wrong. Very wrong. Catastrophically wrong.

As his shock finally began to fade, he continued to stare up at the intact, bald head of the dark-skinned dwarf. Aside from losing his hair, growing more mature and gaining a lot of augmentations, Rion did not look that different from the past!

Of course, his personality and demeanor underwent a complete transformation. Ves did not recognize any trace of the young and brash dwarven miner from before. What stood in his place was a powerful monarch who exuded strength, certainty and a disturbing amount of awareness!

"I... am pretty sure I shot you in the head with a pistol. Bits and pieces of your brain should have been splattered across the deck of the TR-3851."

The dwarf responded with a single acronym. "MTA."

That caused Ves to turn bitter. "Those meddling bastards. It figures. The mechers are one of the few people who have the capability to bring a body like yours back from the dead. How much... do they know? How much did you retain?"

"NOTHING MUCH." Rion replied in a slightly more measured tone of voice. "TOO MUCH DAMAGE HAS BEEN DONE TO MY BRAIN. WHAT HASN'T BEEN SHATTERED HAD ALREADY DECAYED FOR SEVERAL DAYS. WHEN... I WOKE UP

AGAIN, I BECAME A DIFFERENT PERSON FROM THE RION AADEN YOU KNEW. I... WAS HARDLY A FUNCTIONAL INDIVIDUAL AT THE TIME."

His expression turned cloudy as he remembered how invalid he had been after his restoration.

On the other hand, Ves relaxed for a bit. He was most afraid of the MTA learning about what transpired during the time he possessed Rion. Unless the mecher doctors lied to the dwarf, it was unlikely that anyone learned anything incriminating!

"It seems you got better, though. Much better. You even managed to become an emperor. Why don't you lead your people?"

"THAT... IS A LONG STORY."

The Iron Emperor slowly stepped backwards until he was able to rest his metallic rear end on the steps. His forceful demeanor toned down a bit as he continued to recount his past.

"IT TOOK YEARS FOR ME TO BECOME A FUNCTIONING DWARF AGAIN. MY BRAIN WAS SEVERELY DAMAGED AND THE MTA WAS UNWILLING TO SPEND TOO MUCH OF ITS OWN RESOURCES ON RESTORING ME FURTHER. I ALREADY SERVED MY USE WHEN THEY EXTRACTED WHAT LITTLE MEMORY I RETAINED OF THE INITIAL REBELLION."

"Sounds just like them." Ves said in a sympathising tone.

He relaxed a bit further. He no longer felt as threatened as before. While Rion was definitely still in charge, he seemed more interested in reminiscing about the past with a former 'companion' than taking revenge for getting headshotted.

Ves was not out of danger, though. He had no idea whether Rion planned to turn the tables after he was done. He just recognized that he was powerless to stop the dwarven emperor from doing whatever the heck he wanted.

If that was the case, Ves might as well accept the reality of the situation and act like himself. His current impression of the 'Iron Emperor' already made it clear that the Devil Tongue treatment would never work on this dwarf!

"I DO NOT BEGRUDGE THE MECH TRADE ASSOCIATION." Rion said in his electronically-altered voice. "I HAVE GAINED A NEW LIFE. I SPENT YEARS TO LEARN HOW TO STAND, WALK, SPEAK AND THINK WITH ALL OF MY PHYSICAL AND MENTAL IMPAIRMENTS. I UNDERWENT NUMEROUS OPERATIONS WHERE MY BODY BECAME MORE FUNCTIONAL BY INTEGRATING CYBERNETIC LIMBS, IMPLANTS AND ORGANS. I... HAVE BECOME HALF A MACHINE."

"Well, the title of Iron Emperor certainly suits you." Ves jested a bit.

It was no joke to Rion, though. "BY THE TIME I BECAME... WHOLE ENOUGH AGAIN, TOO MANY YEARS WENT BY. I RETURNED TO A STAR SECTOR THAT HAS ALREADY CHANGED, AND AN EMPIRE THAT I HAD NO HAND IN MAKING."

Ves could understand why Rion would feel alienated from his former dwarven rebel friends. The latter went through so many challenges and experiences that they grew into vastly different people. A lot of foreign dwarves had traveled to Smiling Samuel as well in order to support the dwarven cause.

"Did you have a place in the Vulcan Empire?"

The dwarven leader took a few seconds to reply.

"NO... THE VULCAN EMPIRE WAS NOT MY HOME. ITS PEOPLE ARE ALIEN TO ME. I FELT I HAD NO PLACE, BUT I NEEDED TO FIND MEANING IN MY EXISTENCE. I EVENTUALLY REVEALED MYSELF TO THE GRAND REGENT, BUT REFUSED THE OFFER TO SIT ON MY REAL THRONE."

"Why?"

"BECAUSE I WAS NOT CAPABLE BACK THEN." Rion answered. "I WAS BROKEN AND ONLY RECENTLY REMADE. I DID NOT NOT UNDERSTAND STATECRAFT. I HAVE NO KNOWLEDGE OF ECONOMICS. I HAVE NOT BEEN INTRODUCED TO MILITARY STRATEGY. MY DIPLOMATIC QUALIFICATIONS ARE ZERO. I WAS INEPT AT POLITICS AND INTRIGUE. I MAY NOT HAVE BEEN A CLEVER DWARF BACK THEN, BUT I POSSESSED ENOUGH KNOWLEDGE TO KNOW I WOULD HAVE BEEN A POOR STEWARD FOR THE VULCANITE PEOPLE."

Ves looked at the steady, strong and well-spoken cybernetic dwarf and could not believe that Rion had improved so much!

"You sound like a truly capable leader to me. You would definitely do well if you sat on the throne today."

Rion slowly shook his head. "WHAT YOU SEE AND HEAR TODAY IS REFLECTIVE OF DECADES OF CONSTANT LEARNING. I WORKED HARD TO UNDERSTAND HOW TO MANIPULATE THE LEVERS OF A STATE AND HOW TO LEAD A EMPIRE. I RECEIVED ANONYMOUS INSTRUCTIONS FROM THE BEST AND MOST RENOWNED DWARVEN SCHOLARS OF THE GALAXY AND I RECEIVED THE BEST COGNITIVE AUGMENTATIONS THAT THE VULCAN EMPIRE CAN PROVIDE."

"There must have been a point where you have become smart and capable enough to lead the Vulcan Empire in the open, did you not?" Ves raised his eyebrow.

"I DID NOT WANT TO. THE VULCAN EMPIRE HAS ALREADY CHOSEN ITS OWN WAY, ONE WHICH I DO NOT AGREE WITH. ONLY A SMALL GROUP OF DWARVES INCLUDING THE GRAND REGENTS OF THE TIME HAS EVER KNOWN ABOUT MY CURRENT EXISTENCE, AND THAT IS WHAT I PREFER. IF NOT FOR... RECENT EVENTS... I WAS CONTENT TO WATCH OVER THE VULCAN EMPIRE FROM THE SHADOWS UNTIL MY BODY HAS FINALLY SHUT DOWN ENTIRELY."

"Then... I came around." Ves lamely said.

"YES... YES YOU DID."

"You laid an ambush here... for me." Ves followed up. "You claim you lost your memories when the MTA pieced your brain back together, but how did you recall enough information that you knew that I buried the chunk of Timpala Steel ore in this star system and in this asteroid belt? If the mechers knew that much, they would have already scanned the entire asteroid belt from one end to the other end with their high-tech scanners. There shouldn't have been any Timpala Steel for me to retrieve!"

He knew that he was taking a risk by bringing this matter up, but he had to solve this contradiction! He would never feel comfortable if he knew that there was a possibility that the MTA knew exactly what he was doing in the Trion Enze System!

At least Ves did not have to worry about any MTA snoops eavesdropping on this conversation. A Saint Kingdom was not a joke. Only another ace pilot could resist the reality-distorting effects of a powerful domain field!

"I DID NOT LIE... VULCAN." Rion firmly answered. "MY MEMORIES OF THE ATTEMPT TO ESCAPE FROM DESALA X WAS TRULY SCRAPPED. IT WAS ONLY LONG AFTER THE MTA GAVE UP ON ME THAT I GRADUALLY BEGAN TO RECALL WHAT HAPPENED."

"How? Ves looked puzzled. This sounded impossible to him! "The MTA's medical tech is insane. It knows how the human brain works to a much better degree than almost anyone else. They should have definitely been able to retrieve at least that much detail."

"HEHEHEHE..." The Iron Emperor eerily chuckled. "YOU ARE A GOD, ARE YOU NOT? WHAT HAPPENED TO ME... WAS A MIRACLE... FROM VULCAN. FROM YOU."

"Uh..."

Rion's armored limb softly patted the pole of the Banner of Vulcan. The control and strength exertion of that massive dwarven suit of armor was so precise that the weaker metallic pole did not incur any risk of damage!

"THE FAITH OF MY PEOPLE RESTORED MY MEMORIES."

Ves was gobsmacked!

What the hell?! How could one of his totems magically heal a brain-damaged dwarf to the point where he regained memories that weren't present anymore?

This entire notion was too ludicrous for Ves to accept!

Yet... hadn't he witnessed a similar miracle, once?

He recalled the strange, continued existence of the Four Aspects of Lufa. Despite being made of low-quality, disposable biological tissue, the living statues continued to remain healthy long after their expiration date!

How?

Ves had no idea!

All he knew was that spiritual shenanigans were at work somehow. He understood far too little about spiritual phenomena to form a logical explanation of how these 'miracles' happened.

He understood why it happened, at least in the case for Rion. As the so-called Iron Emperor continued to hold the Banner of Vulcan like a cherished heirloom, it was clear that he had bonded to it to an insanely high degree.

Both of them had grown and supported each other over many years!

Not only that, but the Banner of Vulcan was also an 'eye witness' to the successful breakout attempt on Desala X. Even if Rion's memories couldn't be restored, the living totem could have just transferred its own 'memories' to the dwarf!

Ves didn't know what to think about this situation. It turned out that Rion either remembered everything or at least enough to know about the truth behind Vulcan.

He was accustomed to breaking dwarven heads, not putting them back together. The Banner of Vulcan which he created as a tool to inspire the dwarves had gone way past its initial specifications and morphed into a spiritual miracle generator!

All of this could have been avoided if Ves had done a proper job at killing Rion.

"YOU WERE THINKING ABOUT HOW YOU SHOULD HAVE BEEN MORE THOROUGH AT ENDING MY LIFE AT THE TIME, DIDN'T YOU, VULCAN?"

"Oops."

Busted!

Chapter 3346: Imperial Ambitions

This was a strange reunion.

Everytime his consciousness traveled back to the past with the help of the System, he did what he was supposed to do in order to experience what it was like to pilot a mech before returning to the present.

Of course, battles where mech pilots needed to risk their lives rarely revolved around trivial matters. Many of the mech pilots that the System randomly picked out to host his consciousness became involved in greater events.

Whether it was breaking out of a pocket space or sparking a slave revolt, a mech pilot only fought best when they committed their entire lives for a cause that was greater than themselves.

This was how expert pilots were born, and it did not miss his notice that a noticeably high proportion of Mastery hosts broke through or became exceptional in another way.

Assuming the System had the power to choose the destination of a Mastery experience, it was more effective to select a mech pilot with the potential for greatness. It was only when they threw everything they had for a cause they believed in that their piloting approach maximized all of their potential, allowing Ves to observe first-hand how a given mech type should ideally be piloted.

That was all Ves cared about, really. He never forgot that learning a Mastery was supposed to benefit him. He never put much thought about what his hosts gained out of these brief time jaunts. After all, the events happened so far away from his present location and so far back in time that it was impossible for his 'past' deeds to come back and affect his present circumstances.

At least, that was what he had always assumed.

It appeared he had to correct this presumptuous conclusion. Now that he came face to face with a familiar Mastery host of the past, Ves regretted that he had acted with so little regard for the ripple effects he created in the timeline!

It was worse when Ves actively traveled to a region where his 'past' self once intervened. This vastly increased the probability of sparking a highly undesirable confrontation and reuniting with an 'old friend'.

In other words, Ves brought this upon himself.

The Iron Emperor was the fourth individual who could make Ves feel as if he was nearly completely exposed.

Calabast and Sigrund were the first ones to pierce through his veil of secrecy. Both of them subsequently blackmailed him with the information they gained.

After that came Master Willix whose authority and vision were far too great for Ves to resist against. It was fortunate that she only grasped one of his lesser secrets and not his greatest one that would instantly bring the entire MTA down on his head!

Now, a disgustingly clever, wise and observant version of Rion Aaden joined this club!

The current Rion was more comparable to the likes of Minister Shederin and Senator Tovar than the stupid, gullible dwarf of the past.

Even a pig would turn into a scarily smart and competent statesman after receiving the equivalent of trillions of hex credits worth of cybernetic implants, genetic modification and tutoring from some of the best teachers in the galaxy!

What also turned Rion into a formidable individual was how much time had passed since he started his new lease on life. So much time had passed since the beginning of the rebellion that he had gone through many life experiences and matured each step of the way.

All of this resulted into a dwarf that truly deserved to be regarded as the emperor of the Vulcanites. Ves even admired Rion Aaden a bit for working so hard all of this time. The determination he showed was much more impressive than any other dwarf or human for that matter. Step by step he studied and improved his skills until he was truly able to lead the Vulcan Empire to a greater future!

Why didn't it happen, then? Why didn't Rion step out of the shadows? With the current crisis engulfing the Vulcan Empire, his people needed his leadership more than ever!

"ARE YOU WONDERING WHY I HAVE DECIDED TO REMAIN IN THE SHADOWS AFTER SO LONG?"

Ves tentatively nodded. He did not feel as uncomfortable in Rion's presence than before, but he was always mindful that his life and future was still in the dwarven emperor's hands.

Just his powered dwarven armor was strong enough to flatten Ves like a bug, especially when the local gravity was as high as 4.6 g!

Fortunately, Rion did not look like he was eager to repay the round that Ves had fired through his head.

Instead, the dwarf continued to set upon the steps of his throne while carefully caressing the banner draped over his thick, armored legs.

"I HAVE ALREADY REVEALED ONE OF MY REASONS FOR STAYING OUT OF THE FOREFRONT OF THE VULCAN EMPIRE. THE VULCAN EMPIRE HAS ALREADY CHOSEN ITS LEADERS."

"Not good ones considering what has happened on their watch." Ves pointed out.

The cybernetic dwarf shook his head. "MY GRAND-NEPHEW IS DOING THE BEST HE CAN DO WITH THE RESOURCES HE HAS AVAILABLE. EVEN I CANNOT SUPPRESS THE CONFLICT BETWEEN THE VULCAN FAITH AND THE DWARVEN GOD CULT. I SHOULD KNOW. I HAVE ALREADY TRIED."

"You... sound like you're not entirely happy with the state of the Vulcan Empire."

"LOOK AT WHAT HAS HAPPENED." The armored dwarf waved his giant armored hand. "THE FOUNDATION OF THE VULCAN EMPIRE WAS FLAWED FROM THE BEGINNING. THE DOMINOES OF ITS OWN FALL HAD ALWAYS BEEN IN PLACE. THE EVENTS THAT TRANSPIRED AFTER YOUR ACTIONS ARE SOLELY THE FAULT OF THE VULCANITES THEMSELVES."

Ves took a second look at Rion. The dwarven emperor's analysis of the situation matched disturbingly well with Shederin Purnesse's own views on the stability of the Vulcan Empire!

"You call yourself the Iron Emperor, but how can you rule when there aren't any people under you anymore? The state founded in your name is collapsing at the seams!"

Bang!

Rion's armored fist clanged against the step!

"THE VULCAN EMPIRE IS A STATE FOUNDED IN YOUR NAME, NOT MINE. THE QUALITY OF ITS CULTURE AND INSTITUTIONS REFLECT THE QUALITY OF THE SOURCE THAT INSPIRED THEIR CREATION. IF MY CURRENT SELF WAS IN CHARGE AT THE TIME, I WOULD HAVE NEVER ALLOWED THE VULCAN EMPIRE TO LAY THE SEEDS OF ITS OWN DESTRUCTION AT THE ONSET."

That sounded strange. Ves had never heard a head of state disparaging his own empire!

"You... don't believe in your own state?"

"DO YOU BELIEVE IN THE STABILITY AND SURVIVAL OF THE VULCAN EMPIRE?" Rion asked as his cybernetic yellow eyes stared straight at Ves.

"No." Ves truthfully replied. "When I first heard about it, I always thought it sat in a precarious position. Now that I have visited it and experienced the charm of your subjects, I think even less of this state."

"SINCE YOU CAN THINK ABOUT THIS, WHY WOULD I BE DIFFERENT?"

"Uh..."

"DID YOU THINK I WAS IDENTICAL TO THE OTHER VULCANITES YOU HAVE MET WHO REFLEXIVELY FALL BACK ON THEIR RELIGIOUS FANATICISM AND THEIR ACQUIRED SENSE OF DWARVEN SUPREMACY?"

"Kinda..."

"FOOL." Rion flatly said. "UNLIKE NEARLY EVERY INHABITANT OF THE VULCAN EMPIRE, I HAVE KEPT MY DISTANCE FROM ITS SOCIETY. FOR DECADES, I CONSTANTLY TRACKED THE GROWTH AND EVOLUTION OF MY STATE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF AN OBSERVER. THIS HAS ALLOWED ME TO SHIELD MYSELF AGAINST THE LIES, DISTORTIONS AND PROPAGANDA THAT HAS WARPED THE DWARVES WHO LIVE THERE. I KNOW THE TRUTH, AND THE TRUTH HAS SET ME FREE."

"If you know how awful your Vulcanites truly are, then why didn't you put more effort into changing them? I mean, just look at how they sound. If they aren't arguing about whether their god is a human or a dwarf, they're constantly shouting slogans on how they wished to exterminate every tall folk in the galaxy."

"THAT IS WHY MY FELLOW DWARVES ARE IMBECILES."

The brutal statement shocked Ves. He never thought that Rion in his current, impressive state would admit that! What shocked him even more was the implications behind these words.

Ves began to develop a suspicion about why Rion never bothered to intervene after all of this time.

"You gave up on the Vulcan Empire, didn't you?" He asked. "You saw what your fellow dwarves have created in your absence and thought that it was too far gone for you to salvage."

Rion's grim face loosened up and smiled. "YOU GET IT NOW. I INDEED THINK LITTLE OF VULCAN EMPIRE. IT IS A ROTTEN STATE THAT SHOULD NEVER HAVE EXISTED. WHAT IS HAPPENING NOW WOULD HAVE HAPPENED SOONER OR LATER. AT LEAST NOW I NO LONGER HAVE TO WAIT IN SUSPENSE."

"You don't sound like you take your position as emperor seriously at all. Are you really content to hide out here and watch as trillions of dwarves lose their rights or get displaced?" Ves looked confused.

"THE OVERWHELMING NUMBER OF DWARVEN CITIZENS WERE DOOMED FROM THE START. THEY WERE ALREADY BEYOND SAVING. THERE IS NOTHING I CAN DO TO AVOID THEIR CURRENT FATES."

Ves felt a shiver run through his back. The realism displayed by Rion was too brutal and cold-hearted. He was completely unlike the other Vulcanites who always stood up for their fellow dwarves. If Rion clearly hadn't identified himself as a dwarf already, people would have mistaken him as a human!

Rion's armor let out a lot of noise as he slowly stood up from the steps. His heavy, armored body stepped closer to Ves. "I NEVER THOUGHT ABOUT RULING THE VULCAN EMPIRE OR SAVING ITS CITIZENS BECAUSE THEY ARE ALL BEYOND SAVING."

"So you're just going to do nothing at all and just hide out here until your body expires?"

The dwarven emperor fell silent for a moment before he spoke again.

"WHEN THE MTA BROUGHT MY BODY BACK TO LIFE, I WOKE UP AS A DIFFERENT PERSON. I DO NOT CONSIDER MYSELF TO BE THE RION THAT YOU AND MY FORMER REBEL COMRADES KNEW. I AM A DIFFERENT PERSON AND LIVED A DIFFERENT LIFE. HOWEVER, THE ONE TRAIT THAT I SHARE WITH THE RION THAT I USED TO BE IS THAT I AM A DWARF. FROM THE MOMENT I WOKE UP AGAIN, I HAVE ALWAYS SOUGHT THE MEANING BEHIND MY RETURN. WHY DID I COME BACK TO LIFE? WHAT IS MY PURPOSE IN LIFE. WITH THE RIGHTS AND PRIVILEGES THAT I HAVE ENJOYED THROUGHOUT MY LIFE, I HAVE GRADUALLY REALIZED THAT I AM BURDENED BY A HEAVY RESPONSIBILITY, ONE THAT ONLY I CAN FULFILL."

"And what is that responsibility?"

"TO LEAD THE DWARVES TO A BETTER FUTURE THAN NOW!" Rion raised an armored fist! "MOST VULCANITES ARE BEYOND SAVING, BUT THAT DOES NOT MEAN THAT I HAVE FORSAKEN DWARVENKIND AS A WHOLE! IN FACT, IT IS THE OPPOSITE! ONLY BY REMOVING THE CANCER THAT IS THE VULCAN EMPIRE CAN OUR SPECIES TRULY MOVE FORWARD!"

"You... what is it what you are trying to accomplish?"

Rion carefully gripped the pole of his banner. "LOOK AT THE VULCAN EMPIRE. LOOK AT THE STATE OF THE DWARVEN DIASPORA. WHERE DO MY PEOPLE LIVE?"

"They live in different parts of human space."

"CORRECT, AND THAT IS EXACTLY WHAT IS WRONG WITH DWARVENKIND!"

"Why? Aren't you guys humans as well?" Ves frowned a bit.

"I DO NOT BELIEVE SO." Rion spoke as he stepped closer to the person who murdered his past self. "TOO MANY PEOPLE SEEM TO HAVE THE IMPRESSION THAT DWARVES AND HUMANS SHARE THE SAME IDENTITY AS DIFFERENT STRAINS OF HUMANKIND. YET DOES YOUR ATTITUDE AND BEHAVIOR REFLECT THIS STANCE? NO. IN PRACTICE, DWARVES ARE TREATED AS A SEPARATE SPECIES. NO HUMAN TREAT DWARVES AS EQUALS. INSTEAD, WE ARE BEING LOOKED DOWN UPON, BOTH LITERALLY AND FIGURATIVELY."

Ves could do little to excuse such behavior. He had seen it happening many times himself. The galaxy wasn't fair and humanity was still too flawed to let go of its biases and prejudices.

"I can't deny that has happened, but heavy gravity variant humans—"

"DON'T CALL US THAT!" Rion exploded into Ves' face!

For the first time since this meeting, Rion had finally lost his cool!

"WE ARE NOT 'HUMAN', BOTH FROM A CULTURAL AND BIOLOGICAL STANDPOINT! YOU HAVE ALREADY ADMITTED YOURSELF THAT DWARVES ARE TREATED MORE POORLY THAN OTHER HUMANS. OUR PHYSIOLOGY HAVE ALSO DIVERGED SO WIDELY FROM BASELINE HUMANS THAT THERE IS A STATE OF REPRODUCTIVE ISOLATION BETWEEN OUR TWO SPECIES."

BOOM!

Rion had stamped the deck with his armored leg, causing Ves to momentarily shake from the nearby vibration!

"DWARVES ARE NOT HUMAN. NOT ANYMORE. WE ARE A SEPERATE SPECIES, BUT ALMOST NOBODY REALIZES THAT. AS THE EMPEROR OF DWARVENKIND, IT IS MY DUTY AND CALLING TO MAKE MY PEOPLE RECOGNIZE THE TRUTH. AS SOON AS MY FELLOW DWARVES RECOGNIZES THAT THEY WERE NEVER HUMAN AND WILL NEVER BE TREATED AS THEIR EQUALS, I CAN FINALLY LEAD THEM TO THEIR REAL DESTINY?"

"And that is...?"

Rion's enormous armored suit bent down until his dark and bald face rested close to Ves' helmet. "I SHALL LEAD THEM ONTO AN EXODUS FROM HUMAN SPACE AND FOUND A REAL EMPIRE FOR THE DWARVES."

The Iron Emperor finally revealed his true ambition!

"MY ULTIMATE GOAL IS TO FOUND A SOVEREIGN NATION, ONE THAT IS NOT UNDER THE SWAY OF THE MTA OR CFA. THESE HUMAN ORGANIZATIONS WILL NO LONGER BE ALLOWED TO DICTATE AND LIMIT THE DEVELOPMENT OF DWARVENKIND! ONLY BY CREATING OUR OWN STAR NATION IN A GALAXY THAT EXISTS OUTSIDE OF HUMAN SPACE WILL DWARVENKIND TRULY BE ABLE TO MATCH AND EXCEED HUMANITY'S GLORY!"

Rion arrogantly looked down at Ves. "SO NO, I WILL NOT TAKE CHARGE OF THE VULCAN EMPIRE. IT IS A HANDICAPPED STATE THAT SITS RIGHT INSIDE HUMANITY'S BACKYARD. I REFUSE TO BECOME THE MTA'S SLAVE!"

Ves couldn't count the amount of times he was shocked today. Of all of the ambitions that he had ever heard from a person, no one had ever been as bold as Emperor Rion, who openly wanted to defect from human civilization!

Chapter 3347: Callous Disregard

The reborn Rion Aaden had struggled to find his purpose for many years.

Why was he brought into this reality?

Why must he wake up day after day and make use of the life that he had regained?

What was his purpose?

He struggled long and hard to find answers to each of these questions. As the Vulcanites who became aware of his existence showered him with wealth and opportunities, he calmly took his time to resolve his doubts and live a life with meaning.

With all of the help and resources the Vulcan Empire provided to him, Rion gradually expanded his vision and became more capable of looking at the state of dwarvenkind from a more detached perspective.

He lamented how dwarves were being treated but did not believe the Vulcan Empire was the solution to their problems.

One day, he gained an epiphany.

The entire model of how dwarves lived by attaching themselves to human society was flawed!

Humanity was strong. There was no doubt about that. The problem was that humanity strongly believed in the superiority of its own kind. Anyone who visibly deviated from the human template were often treated poorly due to various reasons.

This was a fundamental trait of humankind. It emerged as a means to make humans stand out from other alien races and reject the ideology of cosmopolitanism that had almost caused humanity to lose its independence during the Age of Stars!

"HUMANITY SUCCEEDED IN PREVENTING ITSELF FROM BECOMING THE PLAYTHINGS OF ALIEN RACES, BUT THE SAME CANNOT BE SAID FOR THE DWARVES." Rion explained as he calmed down a bit from his earlier reaction. "ALTHOUGH THE SHACKLES AREN'T ALWAYS LITERAL, IT IS UNQUESTIONABLE THAT TOO MANY DWARVES LIVE IN BONDAGE TO THEIR HUMAN MASTERS. HOW MANY IMPOVERISHED DWARVES LIKE MY OWN SELF LIVE ON MINING PLANETS AND SUFFER FROM A LACK OF OPPORTUNITY? HOW MANY DWARVES ARE TREATED AS LESS THAN PEOPLE DESPITE LIVING IN THE SAME SOCIETY AS OTHER HUMANS?"

Ves still looked shocked after hearing Rion's radical ambition. "I get that. I truly do. You're still mad, though! Human civilization is the strongest power in this galaxy! There is nowhere you can go to escape the reach of humanity! Even if you set up a truly independent star nation in the Red Ocean or some other dwarf galaxy, humanity will come knocking at your door sooner or later. I don't think the Big Two will look kindly at your attempt at seceding from human civilization!"

Rion smirked. "THE COSMOS IS LARGER THAN YOU CAN EVER THINK. THERE ARE OTHER GALAXIES AND SPACE REGIONS OUT THERE, VES. THE DREAM OF FOUNDING A TRULY INDEPENDENT DWARVEN STAR EMPIRE DOES NOT HAVE TO BE ATTAINED IN A SINGLE STEP. THIS IS BOUND TO BECOME A STEP-BY-STEP PROCESS WHERE I MUST PATIENTLY ACCUMULATE THE TECH, RESOURCES AND MANPOWER NEEDED TO FREE THE DWARVES."

If anyone else claimed that they could lead the dwarves to founding a star nation on their own, Ves wouldn't have taken the claim seriously.

Yet Rion was a much more exceptional dwarf than any other Vulcanite, and he sounded as if he was absolutely serious about fulfilling this grand ambition!

This was the purpose that Rion had settled upon to justify his second life! Without a goal that could continue to drive him forward, there wouldn't be much point for him to continue his existence. This was the answer to his existential problem!

Rion slowly reached out with his heavily armored arm and patted Ves on his own armored shoulder.

"IN A WAY, I HAVE YOU TO THANK FOR GIVING MY SPECIES AN OPPORTUNITY TO ATTAIN FREEDOM. YOU CREATED ME, VULCAN. YOU INSTILLED THE SEED OF A SEPARATE DWARVEN IDENTITY WHEN YOU FIRST CAME AROUND. NOW, THE SEED YOU HAVE PLANTED IN MY MIND IN THE FORM OF A KINETIC ROUND HAS BLOOMED INTO A TREE THAT SHALL GUIDE DWARVENKIND OUT OF HUMAN CIVILIZATION AND FIND A HOME THAT IS FREE FROM THE BIG TWO'S HEGEMONY."

Ves twitched his mouth. "You're welcome. If I have to be honest, I don't think you have any hope of escaping the reach of human civilization. You're a pretty clever dwarf, so you should know how formidable humans can be. The Big Two won't tolerate your attempt to set up a separate nation that can potentially pose a threat to humanity in the future. The precedent alone is a major threat to our society. If one minority group breaks off one day, three more minorities will declare independence the next day!"

"I HAVE ALREADY ACCOUNTED FOR THESE REACTIONS. MY MASTER PLAN IS DECADES IN THE MAKING AND IS MORE THOROUGH THAN YOU THINK. I HAVE NO INTENTIONS OF OVERESTIMATING THE BIG TWO. I WILL START SMALL AND REMAIN DISCREET FOR MANY YEARS TO COME."

"So what do you intend to do, exactly?"

The mention of a masterplan aroused Ves' curiosity. He didn't just want to know how Rion intended to do the impossible, but also wanted to learn whether the dwarf's future actions would affect him and his clan in any way!

"FIRST, I WILL EVACUATE THE SINKING SHIP THAT IS THE VULCAN EMPIRE WITH A HAND-PICKED GROUP OF LOYALISTS AND TALENTS."

"I thought you said that the Vulcanites are a stupid and flawed people."

"I DID SAY SOMETHING OF THAT NATURE, BUT MY DESCRIPTION APPLIES TO AN ENTIRE CULTURE, NOT A SINGLE INDIVIDUAL." Rion patronizingly corrected him. "THE VULCAN EMPIRE MAY BE A DETESTABLE STATE, BUT IT CAN STILL FUNCTION AS A TALENT FACTORY FOR SMART, TALENTED AND CLEAR-HEADED DWARVES. I HAVE SPENT MANY YEARS TO GATHER THE BEST AND BRIGHTEST CITIZENS OF THE VULCAN EMPIRE AT MY SIDE. LOYAL SUBJECTS SUCH AS SAINT MAYORKA SUPPORT MY DREAM AND WILL UNQUESTIONABLY FOLLOW ME AS I ENDEAVOR TO BECOME THE TRUE EMPEROR OF DWARVENKIND."

That was quite a clever approach! No wonder Rion had no attachment and did not hesitate to disparage the Vulcan Empire.

To him, the flawed dwarven state was merely a talent factory to him! While many Vulcanites that grew up in Smiling Samuel were either average or awful individuals, there were always exceptions.

The name and reputation of Rion Aaden was so great that he had no problem recruiting the greatest citizens of the Vulcan Empire!

The people who served the Iron Emperor aboard this modest frigate were probably just a fraction of this secessionist organization. The ambitious dwarven leader must have amassed at least a million dwarven followers!

An elite organization that consisted of the best scientists, mech pilots, soldiers, engineers, academics, artists and other vital occupations of the Vulcan Empire had unlimited prospects!

By preventing the fat and garbage from polluting this group, the Iron Emperor was free to start a new star nation that was much more enlightened and better run than the current dwarven state!

In other words, the Vulcan Empire was just a test run.

The dwarven star empire that Rion truly wished to rule over was the real deal!

Though Ves admired Rion's guts and ambitions, he felt quite worried about what might ensue because of this. What if... the secessionist dwarves succeeded and managed to create a star empire that rivaled human civilization?

He couldn't hold in his concerns.

"Do you harbor any animosity towards humanity?"

"TRUTHFULLY, NO." Rion calmly replied. It sounded like he really meant it. "HUMANS ARE JUST IGNORANT, A TRAIT THAT MANY DWARVES SHARE AS WELL. IT IS THE NATURE OF LIFE THAT ONE SPECIES HOLD THEIR INTERESTS ABOVE OTHER SPECIES. HUMANITY'S POOR TREATMENT OF DWARVES IS AN INCURABLE FLAW. IT IS IN THE BEST INTERESTS OF BOTH OUR SPECIES TO SEPARATE FROM EACH OTHER IN AN AMICABLE FASHION. GENERATING FURTHER HATRED AND NEGATIVITY WILL ONLY DISTORT THE DWARVEN PEOPLE AND REDUCE THEIR CHANCES OF SURVIVAL. JUST LOOK AT WHAT THE VULCAN EMPIRE HAS WROUGHT TO SEE AN EXAMPLE OF THAT. DWARVES MUST LEARN FROM THIS DISASTER AND REALIZE THAT WE MUST MOVE BEYOND OUR RACIAL GRIEVANCES IN ORDER TO THRIVE."

To Rion, the Vulcan Empire served as an excellent example of what dwarves shouldn't do. It sounded cruel, but the state he was nominally in charge of was just a disposable tool to him! Once it served its purpose, it no longer had a reason to exist!

In fact, it would have been even better for the Vulcan Empire to crash and burn! The more drastic its collapse, the more effective it served as a bad example to follow!

What discomfited Ves quite a lot was how casually Rion dismissed the wellbeing of most of the citizens of his current empire. Although he talked a lot about trying to free and improve the lives of dwarvenkind, in reality he had no qualms condemning billions if not trillions of Vulcanites to death, captivity, exile or foreign occupation!

In order to realize his ambitions, Rion decided that he could not afford to be dragged down by the dregs of his race.

The vast majority of them were too ignorant, hateful, biased or just plain stupid to earn their emperor's appreciation. Ves even suspected that Rion would gladly dump them all into a black hole in order to cleanse the dwarven race of its ugliest members!

All of these revelations caused Ves to gain a more complete understanding of what Rion was like. He took it upon himself to shoulder a great responsibility and one that compelled him to make a lot of cold-hearted choices.

Was Rion ultimately right? Ves didn't dare to pass his judgement. The game that the Iron Emperor decided to play was so high level that a simple mech designer simply wasn't qualified to give suggestions!

There was one nagging question, though. Ves couldn't figure out what Rion intended to do with a certain aspect of dwarven society.

"If I may ask... does Vulcan play a role in your hypothetical dwarven star empire?"

Though Ves didn't necessarily need it, it would still be great if his incarnation gained a powerful source of spiritual feedback!

With the Vulcan Empire flushing down the toilet, the god that bestowed its name to it was about to lose a hefty amount of spiritual input. Though Vulcan could still rely on other sources of spiritual energy, it was best if his incarnation could gain the support of as many dwarves as possible.

Rion did not immediately answer. Apparently, this was a complicated subject if the dwarven emperor had to think about his response.

"RELIGION... IS A FLAWED AND PRIMITIVE SOCIAL CONSTRUCT." He stated. He was definitely a secularist, it seemed! "I BECAME EVEN MORE CONVINCED OF THIS TRUTH AFTER SEEING HOW RELIGION HAS TORN THE VULCAN EMPIRE APART. BESIDES, DESPITE YOUR CLAIMS, NOW THAT YOU HAVE COME BEFORE ME, IT IS PLAIN TO ME THAT YOU ARE NOT AN ACTUAL GOD. YOU ARE... SOMETHING DIFFERENT. AT BEST, YOU ARE HUMAN WHO HAPPENS TO WIELD SPECIAL POWERS. AM I CORRECT, PATRIARCH LARKINSON?"

Well, at this point there was not much point to denying Rion's well-reasoned suspicions. The dwarven sovereign was too smart and observant to be rebuffed by lies.

Ves lowered his head. "I guess your description is accurate. I can't explain how I am able to do all of these things, but... it's complicated."

"...INTERESTING. I HAVE LEARNED MANY SECRETS THROUGHOUT MY YEARS AND I HAVE MY THEORIES. THEY ARE IRRELEVANT, THOUGH. THE MYSTERIES OF HUMANITY ARE MAINLY RELEVANT TO YOUR SPECIES. IF DWARVENKIND WISHES TO EMERGE FROM THE SHADOW OF ITS PARENT, THEN DWARVES LIKE MYSELF MUST FOLLOW OUR OWN PATH TO POWER!"

Rion raised the Banner of Vulcan and harmonized with it! Although the phenomenon wasn't resonance, it was similar to it in a way that only many years of bonding could produce!

"YOU ASKED ME WHETHER RELIGION WILL PLAY A ROLE TO OUR SPECIES. THE ANSWER IS YES. FAITH IS A POWERFUL MOTIVATOR THAT CAN DISPEL FEAR, UNITE DIFFERENT PEOPLE AND CONTROL THEIR THOUGHTS. I WILL NEVER BE ABLE TO RALLY ENOUGH DWARVES BY RELYING ON MY OWN INDIVIDUAL CAPABILITIES."

This was a surprising response! With how rational Rion sounded, Ves would have thought the dwarven emperor would aim to rely on logic and reason to base his independent dwarven nation.

"You plan to continue to leverage belief in Vulcan?"

"CORRECT." Rion slowly grinned. "VULCAN MAY BE FAKE, BUT YOUR POWERS ARE REAL. I SHALL NEED THEM IN ORDER TO BRING DWARVENKIND TO PROSPERITY. AS LONG AS I SUCCEED, I SHALL BECOME THE HIGHEST RULER OF A SOVEREIGN DWARVEN EMPIRE, BUT YOU SHALL BE ITS SECOND FOUNDER. MY FUTURE SUBJECTS SHALL FOREVER REVERE YOUR CONTRIBUTIONS BY WORSHIPPING YOU AS THEIR 'GOD'! ARE YOU NOT PLEASED?"

"..."

Chapter 3348: Loud Speaker

Ves already suspected it for a while, but now he was truly certain.

He was not going to die today.

Rion did not harbor any great resentment towards the person who killed his previous self and the person responsible for causing his entire empire to collapse!

The Iron Emperor was a truly fitting title for this cybernetic and heavily augmented dwarf. By losing most of his memories of his past along with all of his emotional attachments, he lacked the empathy of most people.

As far as he was concerned, he started off his second life as someone who was already an adult. His abnormal development trajectory molded him into the leader that the dwarven people truly needed, but that was not necessarily good news for the citizens of the Vulcan Empire.

The Vulcanites who hated the tall folk and unflinchingly believed in the most ridiculous notions about their god were undesirable subjects that needed to be wiped out from existence to avoid spreading their poisonous ideology any further!

From that perspective, Ves did not make Rion angry for inflicting so much death and suffering onto his fellow dwarves.

Instead, it was more accurate to state that Ves did Rion a favor by getting rid of the trash!

Combined with the fact that the Iron Emperor apparently wanted to continue to make use of belief in Vulcan to further his control over his subjects, it was clear that killing Ves was counterproductive to his goals!

Besides, Rion had matured so much that it sounded as if he had long made peace with the fact that Ves caused his first death.

This was why Ves relaxed enough to join Rion in setting on the bottom of the steps. Though their respective suits of armor made it clear that their status were very different, for now he genuinely had the illusion that they were merely two old pals who reunited after a long time of separation.

It helped that this was actually the truth in a way.

Rion even played it up by ordering a bot to deliver an iron mug of Ambrosia for each of them. Soon, they began to loosen up a bit by enjoying their drinks.

"Hmmm... this isn't the original recipe. It tastes much better." Ves smacked his lips as he looked impressed at the emperor's swill.

"YOUR RUSHED ATTEMPT AT BREWING AN ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGE BACK THEN WAS WHOLLY INADEQUATE. IT IS A WONDER WE DID NOT ALL DIE OF METHANOL POISONING."

Ves winced a bit.

"Did anyone ever tell you that your electronically-distorted voice gets rather tiring to hear over time? You should tone it down a bit. There must be a setting available to you that can make you speak closer to a normal person."

Rion scoffed at this suggestion. "I AM AN EMPEROR. I STAND ABOVE OTHER DWARVES. I MUST COMPORT MYSELF AS A SOVEREIGN AT ALL TIMES IF I WISH TO COMMAND THE RESPECT AND LOYALTY OF MY PEOPLE. I HAVE STUDIED THE BIOGRAPHIES OF MANY FAMOUS LEADERS AND DYNASTIES. ONE OF THE MOST PERSISTENT REASONS WHY EMPIRES DECAY AND FALL IS BECAUSE THEIR SOVEREIGNS NO LONGER TOOK THEIR RESPONSIBILITIES SERIOUSLY. IF I WISH TO CONTINUE TO LEAD DWARVENKIND FOR MY ENTIRE LIFETIME, I MUST NEVER SLACKEN AND SHOW WEAKNESS."

Ves paused in his drinking. "That... sounds way too harsh. I get why you're so driven, but you're not an expert pilot. You're a living person."

"YOU ARE INCORRECT. I TOLD YOU EARLIER THAT I AM HALF A MACHINE. ALTHOUGH I DID NOT MEAN THIS LITERALLY, MY MECHANIZATION HAS MADE IT EASIER FOR ME TO DETACH MY EMOTIONS AND MY BASER NEEDS. FROM THE MOMENT I CHOSE MY CALLING, I HAVE NO MORE NEED FOR LOVE, HATRED, FEAR, REGRET AND AND SO ON. THEY ARE ONLY SOURCES OF WEAKNESSES TO ME. ONLY CLEAR THINKING IS REQUIRED TO LEAD DWARVENKIND TO GREATNESS."

It sounded logical, but Ves could not accept it. He himself was an emotional person by nature and he had always relied on his own affection to lead his clan. It was unthinkable for Ves to throw away his heart and rely solely on cold hard logic to rule over the Larkinsons!

Perhaps this was why Ves could not get behind the Iron Emperor's approach. Rion sounded like a monster to him, and one of his own making!

The fact that the pretentious dwarven bastard spoke with such a loud, distorted voice and walked around in such a thick and massive suit of armor didn't help!

It was useless to continue this discussion. Rion had prepared a long time for the grand endeavor that he wished to undertake. There was no way he was open to suggestions from others, especially someone who did not really know what he was talking about!

Once Ves and Rion finished their mugs of Ambrosia, the latter began to address the true reason why he sought out Vulcan.

"WHEN I REGAINED MORE OF MY MEMORIES OF MY PAST SELF... I KNEW YOU WOULD RETURN. TIMPALA STEEL IS AN EXCEPTIONALLY VALUABLE EXOTIC THAT IS SCARCE EVEN IN OTHER PARTS OF THE GALAXY. THE ONLY REASON

FOR YOU TO BURY IT IN THIS ASTEROID BELT AT THE TIME WAS TO RETURN SOME DAY TO RETRIEVE THIS PRIZE."

"So you set a trap for me." Ves flatly said.

"I CAST A NET FOR VULCAN, AND I MANAGED TO CATCH A MECH DESIGNER."

"Why? I mean, you just told me earlier that you want to make use of religion as a tool to control the masses, but can't you do that without my help?"

"I COULD, BUT I NEED MORE THAN THAT. IF I TRULY WISH TO GAIN THE ENDURING LOYALTY AND OBEDIENCE OF DWARVENKIND, I MUST STAND OUT FROM THEM IN A WAY THAT UNQUESTIONABLY PUTS ME ON TOP. THAT IS DIFFICULT TO ACCOMPLISH AS THERE ARE STILL MANY FIRST-CLASS DWARVES IN HUMAN SOCIETY WHO HAVE MANAGED TO PROMOTE TO HIGH STATIONS. IT IS NECESSARY BUT ALMOST IMPOSSIBLE FOR A SECOND-RATER LIKE MYSELF TO DEMAND THEIR SUBMISSION."

Ves understood now why Rion banked on religion despite his obvious lack of faith. His power was too insufficient at his current stage. Though the revived dwarf talked a big game and painted himself as the emperor of all dwarves, such a claim was hard to enforce when there were many other powerful dwarves who possessed much more wealth and power than a loud-speaking hillbilly from the galactic rim!

The self-proclaimed iron emperor did not have the foundation to overpower or outspend the dwarven first-raters! Yet he needed to do so in order to truly gain access to the power, tech, resources and manpower needed to found a rival star empire that could truly compete against human civilization on an equal level!

So what kind of measure worked best at swaying the most elite and privileged dwarves in existence? By hoodwinking them with religion!

Belief in Vulcan was unique in that it was highly compelling to every dwarf. It was a faith that was uniquely tailored to the dwarven race and affected both rich and poor, male and female, third-rater and first-rater and many other groups!

Rion smiled knowingly at Ves. "THE POWER OF RELIGION TRANSCENDS THE CLASSES. WITH YOUR PECULIAR TRAITS, YOUR DIVINE PERSONA SHALL BE THE MEANS I PLAN TO USE TO UNITE ALL OF DWARVENKIND. THE VULCAN EMPIRE HAS ALREADY PROVEN THE VIABILITY AND EFFECTIVENESS OF THIS APPROACH. I SHALL MERELY BE REPEATING THIS EXPERIMENT AGAIN BUT WITHOUT ALL OF THE EXCESSES IN THE FIRST ATTEMPT."

This was still a difficult plan to pull off. First-raters were far more difficult to persuade than second-raters. Each of them were incredibly arrogant towards their lessers and Ves doubted that they would fall for this scheme so easily!

There was also a huge flaw to this plan.

"What makes you think the dwarves who embrace your dream will let you take charge of them all?" Ves questioned. "Just because you can persuade the first-class dwarves to believe in Vulcan doesn't mean they think that you should call the shots. They can just retain their belief and Vulcan and force you off your throne!"

The Iron Emperor did not look fazed. Instead, he smirked.

"DID YOU THINK I OVERLOOKED THIS POSSIBILITY? WHAT YOU HAVE JUST SAID IS THE REASON WHY I HAVE SQUATTED IN THIS ASTEROID FOR SO MANY YEARS. I WAITED AND WAITED FOR YOUR ARRIVAL THAT I WAS EVEN PREPARED TO SIT STILL FOR AT LEAST ANOTHER CENTURY FOR YOU OR YOUR AGENT TO TAKE THE BAIT."

That sounded pretty extreme to Ves!

"What... do you want from me that is worth all of that waiting?"

The most important point of this reunion had come. Rion had already explained what had happened to him, what he had done since his revival and what he planned to do for the future.

Now, the conversation finally turned to a topic that was directly related to Ves and his own future!

Rion's bulky armor shifted as he slowly raised himself up to his feet again. Ves also stood up as the mood in the ceremonial chamber grew heavier.

"AS I HAVE SAID BEFORE, I INTEND TO USE RELIGION TO GATHER MORE DWARVES TO ME, BUT I MUST ALSO FIND A WAY TO GUARANTEE MY LEADERSHIP POSITION IN THE MOST DECISIVE MANNER POSSIBLE. THE ONLY WAY FOR ME TO ACCOMPLISH BOTH IS TO TIE THEM TOGETHER. YOU MUST ANOINT ME WITH THE POWER TO RULE OVER THE DWARVES."

"What?! How the hell am I supposed to do that?!"

"IT IS QUITE SIMPLE, VULCAN. YOU ARE A MECH DESIGNER WHO IS FAMED FOR CREATING ARTIFACTS." Rion expressly directed his cybernetic eyes towards the Hammer of Brilliance that was attached to Ves' external toolbelt. "ONE SUCH AS THIS, FOR EXAMPLE."

Ves possessively clutched the handle of his hammer. "This is not for sale. This is a craftsman tool that I use to make fancy stuff. A high and noble sovereign such as you doesn't need such a crude instrument."

"YOUR HAMMER IS ANYTHING BUT CRUDE. SEEING IT MAKES ME EVEN MORE CONFIDENT THAT YOU ARE ABLE TO DELIVER WHAT I REQUIRE. WHAT I NEED IS NOT A HAMMER, BUT A SYMBOL OF AUTHORITY THAT IS TIED SOLELY TO MYSELF AND IMPARTS YOUR BLESSING AND APPROVAL OF MY REIGN OVER DWARVENKIND."

"You mean..."

Rion's cybernetic eyes glowed brighter. "A CROWN, IN OTHER WORDS. I NEED YOU TO CRAFT A CROWN OF YOUR OWN DESIGN THAT MEETS MY REQUIREMENTS."

"Uhm, I'm just a mech designer, Rion. Aren't you asking too much from me?" Ves nervously replied.

"I HAVE STUDIED YOUR WORK EXTENSIVELY, VULCAN. YOUR MECH DESIGNS AND YOUR ARTIFACTS ALL POSSESS QUALITIES THAT TRANSCEND REGULAR PRODUCTS, AS BEFITTING OF AN INDIVIDUAL WHO CLAIMS TO BE A GOD OF CRAFTSMANSHIP. I SHOULD KNOW, BECAUSE I HAVE STUDIED ONE OF YOUR WORKS IN DEPTH."

The Iron Emperor gazed lovingly at the Banner of Vulcan that he constantly held by his side like an old and constant companion.

It was hard to refute Rion when he knew Ves so damn well!

"THE BANNER OF VULCAN ALREADY FUNCTIONS AS MY SCEPTER. ONCE YOU MAKE A CROWN FOR ME, I WILL COMPLETE MY COLLECTION AND WILL TRULY LEAVE NO DOUBT THAT I AM THE ANOINTED EMPEROR OF DWARVENKIND!"

"Okay... so let me get this straight. You went through all of this trouble and waited so many years in this empty star system just so you can seek me out and commission a crown from me?!" Ves asked in an exasperated tone.

BOOM.

BOOM.

BOOM.

Rion stepped closer until he stopped right in front of Ves again. "IF THAT IS THE WAY YOU INTERPRET MY ACTIONS, THEN YES, I AM COMMISSIONING A CROWN FOR YOU. I EXPECT YOU TO DO YOUR BEST AND CRAFT A MASTERWORK, BECAUSE ONLY A TRANSCENDENT ARTIFACT IS REMARKABLE ENOUGH TO CONVINCE THE DWARVEN FIRST-RATERS TO FOLLOW THEIR TRUE EMPEROR."

The Iron Emperor threw an encouraging smile at Ves.

"YOU AND YOUR PEOPLE CAN GO FREE AFTER YOU HAVE COMPLETED MY COMMISSION TO MY SATISFACTION. I HAVE NO INTEREST IN ENDURING THE COMPANY OF YOU HUMANS ANY LONGER THAN NECESSARY. I GIVE YOU MY PROMISE AS EMPEROR THAT YOU AND YOUR PEOPLE ARE FREE TO LEAVE THE VULCAN EMPIRE AND RUN OFF TO THE RED OCEAN. WHAT YOU DO THERE IS NOT A CONCERN FOR DWARVENKIND."

Up until now, Ves didn't think that Rion was so bad. He might be a heartless dwarf with delusions of grandeur, but his logic and rationality meant that he was very realistic.

This time was an exception, though!

"Do you know how impossible it is to fulfill your demand!? I may have made a few masterworks here and there, but it is too much to ask for a masterwork on demand!"

The dwarven leader's expression grew darker. "YOU SHALL OBEY MY WILL, VULCAN. I HAVE LEARNED THAT YOU WORK BEST UNDER PRESSURE, SO LET ME GIVE YOU AN INCENTIVE TO MAXIMIZE YOUR EFFORT. YOU HAVE ONE DAY TO FULFILL MY DEMANDS. IF YOU FAIL TO MEET MY EXPECTATIONS, I SHALL COMMAND SAINT MAYORKA TO FINISH THE JOB AND ANNIHILATE EVERY SHIP AND MECH OF YOUR PRECIOUS GOLDEN SKULL ALLIANCE. YOUR CLAN SHALL COME TO RUIN AND YOUR LARKINSONS SHALL BE BURIED AMONG THE SURROUNDING ASTEROIDS. WORK HARD, VULCAN, AND LIVE UP TO YOUR IDENTITY AS THE GOD OF DWARVES, MECHS AND CRAFTSMANSHIP. IF NOT..."

A huge gun barrel that was as wide as a human head extended out of Rion's underarm and pressed right onto Ves' head.

"I MIGHT DECIDE TO RECIPROCATATE THE FAVOR THAT YOU HAVE GIVEN ME ALL OF THOSE YEARS AGO."

Ves gulped.

Chapter 3349: Dwarf-Human Cooperation

"What is happening over there?" Gloriana wondered as she stared at the projection of the dwarven frigate.

The expeditionary fleet had come to a relative standstill. The threat of the Olympus Mons crushing each and every mech and ship of the Golden Skull Alliance still loomed tall!

Not a single Larkinson, Glory Seeker or Crosser dared to take any offensive actions. They had already thrown their strongest ranged attacks at the dwarven ace mech, only

to find out how badly outgunned they were. Just a single mech could crush an entire fleet!

Naturally, the mood among the Larkinsons was not so good. The pride they built up after defeating numerous difficult opponents in the past had already crumbled.

However, the Larkinsons did not bow their heads so easily. Many of them already tried to come up with ideas on how to break the ace mech's hold over the fleet.

"Can we try to overload the power reactors of the Spirit of Bentheim while attempting to ram the Olympus Mons?"

"You idiot. The ace mech and that frigate are faster and more agile than any of our vessels. They can easily move out of the way of such an obvious attack."

"Then why not throw hundreds of ships in their direction? As long as we pay a sufficient price, we can turn an entire section of space into a destructive inferno. There is no way an ace mech's domain field can withstand so much raw damage!"

"You're dreaming if you think the dwarves won't see us coming! Don't forget that the Olympus Mons excels at close quarters combat. Moving closer will only put us at its mercy."

The power gap was not so easy to bridge. So far, none of the Larkinsons came up with a viable idea. It was just too difficult to counter an ace mech without an ace mech of their own. There was a reason why Saints received so much admiration!

"Stupid Ves." Gloriana muttered as she hugged Clixie against her chest. "Why must he force a confrontation against an ace mech? It's too soon!"

"Miaow." Her cat licked her linger.

"I need to teach him a lesson when he gets back. Our upcoming daughter can't handle the stress!"

Her hand reached down to caress her bulging stomach. The birth of her first child was growing closer and closer. Due to all of the delays, it appeared that her baby girl was about to spend her first days of her life in the old galaxy after all. Gloriana felt mixed about this likely outcome.

"Stupid Ves." She muttered again.

Time continued to pass as Gloriana tried to study the Olympus Mons as best she could with the sensor data that she had at hand. Though she set out to study its weaknesses, she spent most of her time admiring and gleaning insights from the high-end machine. Its design was simply too good for her to find an obvious vulnerability!

As she became increasingly more engrossed in her studies, a chime abruptly pulled her out of her fascination.

The projection of her husband in his stupidly resilient combat armor came into view.

"Ves! What is happening?! Are you safe?!"

"I'm fine, I'm fine!" Ves raised his palm in order to calm his wife. "Look, my 'hosts' aren't giving me much time to talk, so I need to keep this short. I've just negotiated a deal with the dwarf in charge here. He isn't interested in killing us and has agreed to let us all go as long as I satisfy his request."

"What do the dwarves want?"

"Well, I can't say too much, but the guy who invited me over wants to commission a product from me. If all goes well, it will all be finished within 24 hours and we can go free. Since my new 'client' needs me to do my best and isn't particularly interested in anything else from us, he has given us a credible promise that no more Larkinsons will die at the hands of his ace pilot."

Though her husband hadn't revealed much, this entire arrangement sounded fishy to Gloriana. She was quite familiar with Ves' nervous ticks, so she was definitely certain that he was understating their actual threat!

"Ves..."

"Look, this is the best outcome that we can get. As long as I do my job, we can all get away from the Olympus Mons without getting shot at. The big guy here has even offered to make sure that no other Vulcanite forces will get in our way as we exit the Smiling Samuel Star Sector. Compared to the alternatives, this is clearly a win-win arrangement!"

She had serious doubts about this strange deal. Dwarven ace mechs didn't hibernate inside asteroids for many years without a reason!

How could the dwarves here possibly know so long ago that Ves would come and dig up a couple of worthless asteroids?

Why couldn't the mastermind behind this ambush contact the Larkinson Clan through regular channels and commission a product the old-fashioned way?

There were so many questions in her mind that she didn't even know where to begin. Unfortunately, Ves had to cut off his call shortly afterwards, leaving Gloriana with way too much uncertainty.

"You're keeping way too many secrets, Ves. What is it with you and the dwarves, and why do you keep pretending to be Vulcan?"

After Ves messaged several people in the expeditionary fleet, the doom and gloom had faded a bit. The hope of getting out of this confrontation alive calmed everyone down and informed them that there was light at the end of the tunnel.

At the very least, it was unlikely that they would do anything rash.

When Ves ended his last call, he sighed and turned to the giant dwarven armored form. He still couldn't get used to equating the poor and naive dwarven mech pilot back then to this larger-than-life dwarven emperor. Too much had changed over the years!

"Thank you for allowing me to give my people a heads up." He said.

Rion smiled and patted his heavily armored palm onto Ves' shoulder pad. "YOU WORK FOR ME NOW. IT IS IN MY BEST INTEREST TO HELP YOU REACH YOUR BEST CONDITION. I AM NOT A VENGEFUL PERSON LIKE YOU AND I HAVE NO INTEREST IN PURSUING A POINTLESS VENDETTA THAT WILL ONLY LEAD TO LOSSES INSTEAD OF GAINS. AS LONG AS YOU COMPLETE MY COMMISSION, I WILL WRITE OFF YOUR PAST DEEDS AND WE CAN BOTH BID FAREWELL TO EACH OTHER."

All of that sounded nice, but Ves did not forget that Rion just put a gun barrel against his helmet and that his guard dog had already killed a fair amount of Larkinsons today. The Iron Emperor had already made it clear that he was not a gentle leader. As long as things didn't go the sovereign's way, he did not mind resorting to violence to enforce his will!

Still, Ves reasoned that Rion's promise to let everyone go was fairly credible. There was no way to predict what would happen to the crown if its creator died a sudden death.

He was also the sole designer and creator of the crown. Though Ves intended to complete his commission honestly, there was no way Rion or any of his staff could stop the mech designer from slipping in a couple of safeguards just in case.

Neither Rion, his band of highly-skilled personnel or even his pet ace pilot could interfere with the design of the crown! None of them were spiritual engineers and could not see or manipulate the key elements that defined living products!

Just like how Ves had to rely on Rion's honesty and goodwill to get out safely, the Iron Emperor also had to trust that 'Vulcan' would keep his word and not sabotage his own work.

This dynamic of mutual trust and restraint resulted in a subtle mood between the two figures.

Though Rion held all of the power in his hands, he could not solely rely on coercion to obtain what he needed.

The dwarven leader badly needed a powerful and sureproof means of obtaining the loyalty of some of the powerful and wealthy dwarves in human space. He had invested so much time, effort, resources and funding in his masterplan that it would be reckless for him to ruin his entire layout just because he couldn't control himself!

Once Ves realized this truth, he relaxed again. He agreed with Rion that the best possible way for him to survive this ordeal was to cooperate as best as possible.

"LET ME BRING YOU TO YOUR WORKPLACE. I HAVE ALREADY PREPARED ALL OF THE RESOURCES AND PRODUCTION EQUIPMENT THAT YOU WILL NEED TO COMPLETE MY COMMISSION."

The human and dwarf exited the ceremonial chamber and moved to the workshop where Ves was supposed to work. A squad of Praetorian Guard silently surrounded them and easily kept up while staying vigilant for any threats.

"I'm surprised you were willing to wait so long for my arrival." Ves carefully spoke. "Is the crown that indispensable to you? I'm certain that an impressive dwarf such as you could think of other ways of obtaining the support or backing of first-raters."

"THE ALTERNATIVES ARE UNACCEPTABLE." Rion spoke in his loud and electronically-distorted voice that made him sound like a high-tech golem. "I HAVE FORMED MANY PLANS AND PROJECTED ALL OF THEM INTO THE FUTURE. THE CHANCES OF FAILURE WERE TOO GREAT. I HAVE LONG CONCLUDED THAT ONLY AN UNQUESTIONABLE SYMBOL OF AUTHORITY THAT IS BLESSED BY VULCAN WILL ALLOW ME TO ACHIEVE MY HIGHEST GOAL. WITHOUT MY CROWN, I DEEM IT WAS NOT WORTHWHILE TO MAKE MY ATTEMPT AT ALL. WHEN I CHOSE TO AWAIT YOUR RETURN, I WAS ALREADY PREPARED TO WAIT FOR CENTURIES."

That sounded quite extreme!

"And what if I never came?"

"THEN I WOULD DIE AS AN UNFULFILLED EMPEROR. BEFORE MY PASSING, I WOULD MAKE SURE TO ARRANGE OTHER PROMISING DWARVES TO INHERIT MY DREAM AND CONTINUE MY LEGACY. PERHAPS AN HEIR OF MINE WOULD TAKE OVER MY MASTERPLAN AND SQUAT AS LONG AS NEEDED BEFORE YOU OR YOUR OWN INHERITOR ARRIVED."

All of this sounded crazy to Ves.

On one hand, he was flattered that the Iron Emperor thought so highly of his living totems.

On the other hand, the thought that a dwarven stalker was literally willing to wait for his entire lifespan and beyond to commission a product from Ves was incredibly creepy!

"You're crazy, you know that?"

Rion directed a vicious smirk at Ves. "THE LINE BETWEEN GENIUS AND MADNESS IS A THIN ONE. I THOUGHT YOU OF ALL PEOPLE SHOULD KNOW THAT, VULCAN."

"You're too serious all of the time. Can't you take a break for once in your new life? You look like you haven't gone on vacation for decades!"

"YOU DO NOT UNDERSTAND. WHAT OTHERS CALL MADNESS IS MERELY AN INABILITY TO UNDERSTAND ANOTHER INDIVIDUAL'S GENIUS. WHETHER IT IS IGNORANCE, BIAS, A LACK OF KNOWLEDGE OR A DEFICIENCY IN COGNITIVE ABILITIES, THOSE WHO CALL US MAD ARE UNQUALIFIED TO JUDGE US. OUR WORK AND OUR AMBITIONS ARE SO BENEFICIAL AND FAR-REACHING THAT WE CANNOT ALLOW THE OPINIONS OF OTHERS HINDER OUR GREAT MISSIONS!"

Though Ves remarkably agreed with Rion's stance, he did not like how the dwarven emperor put the two in the same boat!

Rion was absolutely bonkers if he could think he could single handedly unite all of the dwarves and convince them to break all of their ties to human civilization in order to start up a rival civilization! It was hubris to think that the Big Two would just allow the dwarves to play in a different sandbox that was outside of their supervision!

Compared to plotting secession on a galactic scale, anything planned by Ves was much more acceptable!

No matter what, Ves always considered himself to be a member of humanity. Though he sought to keep his Larkinson Clan independent, he never thought about stepping out of the umbrella of the Big Two.

Though Ves didn't like the MTA and CFA either, they at least ensured humanity's dominance and survival in the galaxy. They performed essential services and truly safeguarded the human race as a whole. It was not a big deal to obey their rules.

"Is it truly better for dwarvenkind to divorce itself from humanity?"

Chapter 3350: Excellent Working Conditions

When Ves entered the workshop compartment inside the dwarven frigate, his body suddenly lifted from the deck and launched upwards until he smacked into the ceiling!

If he wasn't wearing his Unending Regalia which automatically cushioned the collision, he would have suffered actual injuries equivalent to falling off an office building!

"Goddamn it! You did that on purpose, didn't you?!" Ves cursed as he lost control over his emotions.

He quickly adjusted the setting of his gravitic backpack and slowly toned down its compensation power.

The force pressing him against the metal ceiling slowly grew lesser and lesser until he slowly gained more weight. His armored form gradually drifted downwards until he softly landed on the deck.

His gravitic backpack, which used to apply a counter-gravity of 3.6 g on him, had completely fallen silent at this time.

Ves didn't need it anymore because the artificial gravity in the workshop was set at 1.0 g.

This not only caused Ves to feel as if he had entered a human ship, it also caused Rion's huge and bulky form to stomp less on the deck than before.

"I KNEW YOU WERE A HUMAN, SO MY TECHNICAL STAFF PREPARED THIS WORKSHOP ACCORDING TO THE FINEST HUMAN STANDARDS THAT WE COULD MEET." Rion said as he ignored his guest's complaint. "THE LAYOUT OF THIS WORKSHOP AND THE HEIGHT OF ALL OF THE INTERFACES ARE SET TO BE AS COMFORTABLE AS POSSIBLE FOR A PERSON OF YOUR STATURE. I HIGHLY SUGGEST YOU REMOVE YOURSELF FROM YOUR ARMOR IN ORDER TO WORK MORE COMFORTABLY. I GIVE YOU MY WORD AS EMPEROR THAT YOU WILL NOT BE IN DANGER."

Under these conditions, it hardly mattered whether Ves wore his Unending Regalia. A personal suit of armor could never protect him against the might of an ace mech. Saint Mayorka could crush him regardless of what he wore around his body!

In fact, Ves felt uncomfortable with her oppressive presence even now. Even if her hostility had faded a bit after he came to an arrangement with her emperor, he could never feel at ease when she constantly kept an eye on him as if she was standing right behind his back!

"Hey, Rion."

"THOSE WHO ARE TRULY AWARE OF MY IDENTITY ADDRESS ME AS 'YOUR MAJESTY'. YOU ARE SPEAKING TO THE EMPEROR WHO WILL TRULY UNITE DWARVENKIND UNDER A SEPARATE BANNER FROM HUMANITY ONE DAY."

"Yeah, and I'm your god, so I don't need to scrape and bow before your feet." Ves petulantly said. He was still pissed at the gravity prank that Rion had just pulled off! "Can you tell Saint Mayorka to remove her domain field from this workshop? I can't concentrate when she is staring at me from every angle, and if I can't concentrate, I will never be able to make a masterwork. Just saying."

Rion did not fear Ves at all at this point, so he transmitted an invisible signal that soon prompted the vigilant ace pilot to withdraw her formidable Saint Kingdom from the workshop.

The departure of the Saint's obvious presence allowed Ves to breathe a lot easier. Though his Unending Regalia had shielded him from some of the pressure, the Olympus Mons was just too powerful to block.

Ves reluctantly withdrew from his combat armor and left it to the side. It didn't matter too much if he attempted to make a casual product, but a masterwork artifact was a completely different matter.

Now that the bulk of his protective suit no longer hindered his movements, he was able to perform much more delicate manual work. The removal of a solid barrier that was laced with B-stone also enabled Ves to expand his spiritual senses and gain a better feel of his work.

He took a good look at the workshop facilities. As soon as he spotted the quality and tech of the various lab and production equipment, he couldn't help but look impressed.

"These... these are first-class artisanal machines!" Ves gasped!

This wasn't the first time he encountered first-class equipment. He even worked with them when he made a deal with Master Willix many months ago, so he easily recognized what the Iron Emperor had painstakingly prepared for this critical job.

Ves quickly walked over to a couple of machines. The material scanner and the miniaturized 3D printer were not the best in their respective class. The equipment models were already at least twenty years old and at least two-thirds of them appeared to be second-hand.

In a first-rate state, these machines would have impressed no native. They were too basic, small and low-end to perform serious work. An overwhelming number of producers had already transitioned to working with materializers!

Of course, there was still a role for traditional craftsmanship. Mech designers and other creators who wanted to create masterworks could not accomplish this feat with a single press of the button. They were highly cognizant that they still had to get their hands dirty if they wished to advance further up the ranks.

As Ves spent a couple of minutes to survey the make and models of all of the first-class machines, he slowly furrowed his brows.

"You exchanged this stuff from the MTA, right?"

"WHY ASK A QUESTION WHEN YOU ALREADY KNOW THE ANSWER?"

"Because you're a bastard, that's why. I'm unfamiliar with all of this gear. I need hours to familiarize myself with their specs and operation. I can't possibly make a masterwork crown when I am not even proficient in handling my tools."

The Iron Emperor only gave him 24 hours to craft a crown, which initially didn't sound so bad to Ves. Now that he knew that he was supposed to work in a high-end workshop, he became a lot less pleased about his time allowance.

Fortunately, the dwarves had gone way overboard when equipping this workshop. He didn't think he would have to work with 80 percent of all of this fancy equipment, so that saved him a lot of time in studying manuals.

Of course, the production equipment was only one factor that affected his output. Ves approached the material storage cabinets. He pressed a button that automatically extended a large drawer, revealing large samples of several strange and energetic exotics.

"EFV-343, Extreme Cold Titanium, Histam alloy, Ireon B..."

None of these odd names rang a bell to Ves, but the projected information screens summarized their important properties.

"These are all first-class materials!"

"THE ECONOMIC MIGHT OF A STATE THAT CONTROLS AN ENTIRE STAR SECTOR IS GREATER THAN YOU REALIZE." Rion arrogantly spoke as he stomped over to the cabinets. "IN ADDITION, I HAVE SOLICITED GIFTS AND DONATIONS FROM MANY WEALTHY DWARVEN BENEFACTORS OVER THE YEARS. AT LEAST THIRTY PERCENT OF THESE MATERIALS ARE SPECIALTY PRODUCTS FROM FAR-FLUNG STAR SECTORS. MY FOREIGN BACKERS ARE EAGER TO CONTRIBUTE TO MY GREAT CAUSE."

If there was one thing politicians were good at, it was scamming their donors out of their money and other forms of support. Getting elected and staying in power was expensive business. The higher the stakes, the greater the sums!

Ves looked even more troubled, though.

"I'm unaccustomed to working with all of these high-grade exotics. They're all impressive, but a good product isn't merely about slapping the most expensive materials together. I will not only need to spend a lot of time familiarizing myself with all of their nuances, but I also have to integrate them all in a single design in a way that creates synergies instead of conflicting energy reactions."

"MY TECHNICAL STAFF HAS ALREADY THOUGHT ABOUT THAT, VULCAN. THEY HAVE COMPILED A SET OF DOCUMENTS THAT SUCCINCTLY TELLS YOU WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW." Rion spoke.

Ves blinked. "That will be helpful."

Though he silently complained about how many hours he would have to spend to master the bare minimum of what this workshop had to offer, he was actually quite ecstatic at the chance of playing with all of these expensive toys!

Chances like these didn't come very often, and he gained access to a lot more options that were previously out of reach. This was a chance for him to design and create a product that exceeded his usual limitations and provided him with a preview of what he could accomplish in the future!

"I EXPECT YOU TO DELIVER A WORK OF EXCELLENCE WITH THESE MEANS." Rion spoke, breaking him out of his fascination. "THE CROWN YOU MAKE MUST REACH THE STANDARD OF A FIRST-CLASS PRODUCT. ITS DESIGN, FEATURES AND MATERIAL COMPOSITION MUST ALL REACH A STANDARD THAT IS WORTHY TO BE SHOWN IN FIRST-CLASS CIRCLES. NOT A SINGLE ELEMENT OF THE CROWN MUST SUGGEST THAT A SECOND-RATER IS RESPONSIBLE FOR MAKING IT. HAVE I MADE MYSELF CLEAR?"

Ves suddenly felt a lot less confident about this job. The conditions that Rion kept bringing up made his job more and more difficult.

"You're asking a bit too much from me here! Sure, these tools and materials are excellent, but I'm just a second-class mech designer, you know! If you can give me more time, I can whip up a decent design that can satisfy your requirements. Forcing me to complete this job in a single day is too rushed!"

Rion did not accept his excuses. "YOU ARE VULCAN. YOU ARE THE GOD OF CRAFTSMANSHIP. YOU HAVE A DESTINY WITH DWARVES. FAILURE IS NOT AN OPTION AND SUCCESS IS WITHIN REACH. WORK HARD AND WORK FAST. IN

THE SET OF DOCUMENTS THAT WE HAVE PREPARED FOR YOU, I HAVE WRITTEN MY COMPLETE LIST OF REQUIREMENTS OF WHAT I EXPECT FROM YOU. MAKE SURE TO MEET ALL OF THEM, BECAUSE IF YOU HAVE MISSED EVEN A SINGLE TARGET, THE CROWN IS TOO FLAWED TO BE USED FOR ITS INTENDED PURPOSE. YOU HAVE ONE DAY."

With those ominous words, Rion stepped back and joined his Praetorian Guard up a raised platform where he enjoyed a good view over the entire workshop.

With how much the Iron Emperor was invested in the crown, there was no way he was going to take a break and let Ves out of his sight. Giving the mech designer his privacy was obviously not an option. It was already a great concession to make Saint Mayorka pull back her oppressive domain field from the workshop!

In fact, ever since the ace pilot withdrew her presence, Ves was able to employ a lot more tricks than before.

He could dispatch Blinky to snoop around the corners of the workshop. He could thoroughly scan Rion's augmented and armored body with his spiritual senses. He could even materialize his Amastendira and fire a maximum-powered laser beam through Rion's head!

Perhaps a crude ballistic pistol wasn't good enough to kill Rion permanently, but a big fat laser beam that was hot enough to burn an entire head would definitely accomplish the job!

However, Ves was not naive to know that Rion was under a lot of protection.

Physically, the ship possessed numerous hidden security features that could instantly respond as soon as Ves made a threatening move.

Rion was bound to wear a shield generator or two and his Praetorian Guard probably possessed other defensive tools as well.

It was even likely that Rion wore some kind of personal teleportation device as well that could instantly remove him from a danger zone, thereby negating the effectiveness of bombs and other weapons that inflicted mass damage!

Besides, even if all of this tech fell short, Saint Yila Mayorka was still paying attention, just not as close as before. With her incredibly effective intuition and her extremely fast reaction speed, she could suppress any material or spiritual form of attack before Ves even made his first move!

Ves quietly shook his head. Even if he managed to assassinate the Iron Emperor, so what? Saint Mayorka would go absolutely crazy! There was no way to escape or resist

her power at his current stage! Even Vulcan was like a toddler in front of the extraordinarily strong-willed halfgod.

Once he concluded that the chances of pulling off a daring escape attempt was close to 0 percent, he no longer entertained any useless thoughts and directed his attention to his latest commission.

"What kind of crown befits an emperor?"