

## Mech 3351

### *Chapter 3351: Symbol of Authority*

#### Symbol of Authority

What was a crown?

In ancient times, it was a fancy way of denoting authority. Anyone who wore an elaborate metal band on the head would instantly be recognized as the one in charge.

Over the ages, the tradition of rulers wearing crowns became so strong that their association with power, authority and rights had become ingrained in the human consciousness!

Crown = ruler.

Though monarchies suffered a decline as people no longer took the divine right of kings seriously, they underwent a revival after humanity spread across the stars.

Many wealthy groups and individuals that invested so much into setting up colonies in distant planets wanted to enshrine their right to rule in a way that was compatible with inheritance.

Putting a crown on one's head and calling yourself a king or emperor usually did the job. These terms and the associations behind them were classic templates that humanity was already accustomed to. It was enough to revive them and modernize them so that they worked well in a time where kingdoms and empires stretched across many star systems.

Rion Aaden did not spend all of that time explaining his background, motivations and ambitions for nothing. He provided crucial context to Ves on why the dwarven leader needed a crown and what it was supposed to accomplish.

Just like all of those other rulers in the past, the Iron Emperor wanted to make use of its power and associations to assume leadership over the entire dwarven population!

"In normal circumstances, this is an absolutely silly idea that would never work in a million years."

A crown might look impressive and make anyone wearing it look a lot more dignified, but so what? If anyone could become a boss by donning a crown, Ves would have long made one for himself and put it on his head!

There was more to leadership than symbolism. Laws, rules, agreements, compacts, approval, wealth and other factors were much greater variables that decided who called the shots.

There were way too many examples in human history where the person who actually wore the crown actually held precious little authority!

Instead, it was the people behind the throne or the supposed 'vassals' who actually called the shots.

Ves recalled that the Vesia Kingdom closely matched this pattern. Every Vesian respected the powerful ducal houses first and only paid attention to the royal house afterwards. To the commoners, the king was almost an invisible entity!

Therefore, a crown could never make other people respect its wearer if they had no reason to do so. Crowns worked best if the rulers who wore them already gained the submission of the people through other reasons.

The problem that Rion handed to Ves was that the title and position of Iron Emperor only held sway in the Vulcan Empire.

In the greater galaxy, any dwarf who ran around while claiming to be the emperor of all dwarves would be laughed at before being driven away like an unwanted beggar!

This was because Rion Aaden's foundation among the dwarven galactic community was too inadequate.

Sure, Rion might have gained a bit of respect by becoming the head of a powerful dwarven state, but that would soon be a thing of the past as the Vulcan Empire kept losing territory to the humans every day.

The fall of the empire and his complete lack of hands-on leadership during this time would definitely turn into a stain on his record. Since the Iron Emperor already had a history of abandoning his subjects, who would be crazy enough to fall under his banner?

Since Rion could not rely on logic, facts or incentives to command the respect of the dwarves, he wanted to resort to a time-tested solution that was capable of indoctrinating any person into giving their loyalty to others!

"The crown that I need to make isn't just about creating a symbol of temporal power." Ves murmured. "It must also contain a religious element that suggests that Vulcan has given his divine decree that its wearer is the anointed leader of the dwarves."

Both of these tasks were easy enough to accomplish to Ves. As a mech designer, his technical proficiency was high. Even though he had never made an actual crown in his life, he could quickly get up to speed by performing a bit of research.

As for the religious element, Vulcan was his direct incarnation. Together with his increasingly more expansive spiritual engineering capabilities, he could finetune, specify and empower the glow of the dwarven crown in many different ways!

If his job was to make a crown that satisfied both these requirements, then Ves didn't need to make use of first-class materials and a first-class workshop. He could just whip something up in a couple of hours in his personal workshop aboard the Spirit of Bentheim?

"Unfortunately, it's not that simple."

Ves leaned his smooth-shaven chin against his palm as he reread the document that listed all of Rion's demands.

The dwarf was not that picky when it came to the style, appearance and exact functionality of the crown. The sovereign trusted Ves to design a crown that was fit for the purpose.

Though the document actually listed a lot of restrictions, most of them were merely there to make sure that Ves did not design anything too crazy or radical. Rion preferred to obtain a more classical-looking crown that did not defy too many conventions.

After all, a crown was not a fashion statement.

"Well, I didn't plan to design anything too unconventional anyway. I can work with a classical style." Ves muttered.

What Rion actually paid attention to was whether the crown was 'good' enough to do its job. The quality of its craftsmanship was the strictest requirement of this job. If Ves wasn't able to turn this crown into a masterwork, then he could say goodbye to everything!

Combined with the need to turn it into a first-class product, the difficulty level of this simple-sounding job was high!

What Rion wanted was for Ves to make a dwarven heirloom that would remain impressive to the highest echelons of society for centuries, if not millenia! This was why it could not look shabby in the slightest. No other crown in existence was allowed to outclass Rion's symbol of authority!

As Ves continued to read through the list of requirements, he found other troublesome points.

For one, the crown had to be exclusive to Rion Aaden. It would only show its approval and its strongest impression when it was worn by its designated wearer. Anyone else who attempted to wear this crown must receive its rejection!

Ves turned around and looked up at the dwarven leader who overlooked the workshop from above.

"Hey Rion."

"WHAT IS YOUR QUESTION, VULCAN?"

"It says here that you want to turn this crown into your exclusive property."

"THAT IS CORRECT. IS THERE A PROBLEM? I RECALL THAT YOU HAVE THE CAPABILITY TO DISTINGUISH AND DISCRIMINATE AGAINST THE USERS OF YOUR PRODUCTS. YOUR YLVAINAN MECHS AND YOUR HEXER MECHS ARE NOTED FOR THIS PROPERTY."

Ves inwardly grimaced. This dwarf had studied him from top to bottom. It would be hard to hoodwink such a well-informed client.

"I'm not talking about that. What I truly want to bring up is whether you are sure you want to permanently tie the crown to you. I mean, you won't be around forever. What happens if you die a century or a couple of centuries later? I don't think your independent dwarven state would be stable at that time. Being able to pass your crown to a capable or designated successor could be really handy at that time. Just say the word and I will incorporate a mechanism where you can allow other dwarves to inherit the crown based on bloodline, selection or other factors."

Though Ves didn't particularly care about Rion's grand venture, it would be a shame for his sovereign dwarven star nation to collapse and come to nothing after its great emperor's passing.

"YOU DO NOT NEED TO CONCERN YOURSELF ABOUT THE SUCCESSION OF MY FUTURE EMPIRE." Rion firmly shook his head. "BY THE TIME MY REIGN FINALLY ENDS, MY DWARVEN NATION NO LONGER NEEDS TO RELY ON THIS CRUTCH TO ENSURE A STABLE SUCCESSION OF LEADERSHIP. THE CROWN IS ONLY NEEDED TO ATTAIN THE INITIAL LOYALTY OF POWERFUL DWARVEN GROUPS. IT MUST ENSURE THEY WILL RESPECT MY AUTHORITY IN THE ABSENCE OF AN EXISTING GOVERNMENTAL STRUCTURE THAT ENCOURAGES COMPLIANCE."

In other words, the Iron Emperor needed to borrow the power of the crown in the early stages of the masterplan. Once he succeeded in his initial goals and founded a strong dwarven nation, the culture and institutions he built up would gradually take over the role and provide a much more systematic way to ensure loyalty.

"IN MY LIFETIME, THE CROWN MUST FORM A GUARANTEE THAT NO OTHER CHALLENGER OR RIVAL CAN USURP MY THRONE. EVEN IF THEY TAKE MY CROWN, VULCAN MUST NEVER APPROVE THEIR REIGN. ONLY THIS CAN GUARANTEE THAT DWARVENKIND WILL GROW AND DEVELOP UNDER MY DIRECTION."

All of this sounded logical, but Ves still found it strange that the crown should only work for as long as Rion was alive. The dwarven leader was so unwilling to share power that he did not want to open up the possibility that others could depose him from power and take his authority for themselves!

What a selfish dwarf!

Didn't this mean that once Rion died, it was of no concern that his new dwarven nation might collapse or split apart overnight?

"Well, you're the client, so I guess I'll make that happen."

Rion did not impose any other excessive demands. The crown didn't really need to come with any functions. It had to be as enduring and eternal as possible, so Ves was not allowed to incorporate any technological components to its design.

However, the Iron Emperor did not say no to some additional bonus features. Making the crown levitate or enabling it to project a protective barrier were all allowed as long as Ves was able to accomplish it without resorting to electronic components.

"This is a bit too difficult for me." Ves frowned. "I would have to play around with the more unusual first-class materials in order to implement something like this in a crown."

The problem was that he had too little time to figure all of this out! He had no choice but to pare down his ambition and stick to a fairly simple and straightforward design in order to make a crown within the deadline.

After familiarizing himself with all of the demands that he needed to meet, Ves decided to start by drafting an initial sketch of his proposed crown.

"I shouldn't adhere to the classic designs that are already familiar throughout history. This must be a crown for a dwarven civilization, not a human one. There needs to be a distinct break in style from the past."

When Ves thought out crowns for dwarves, he imagined a thicker, heavier and more angular metal headwear.

The crown for someone who called himself the Iron Emperor had to wear an item that looked close to iron in appearance, so metallic grey was the way to go. Whether it would be matte or shiny could be decided later.

"I should add jewels as well, preferably glowing ones."

Ves gained a bit of inspiration when his thoughts turned into this direction.

Instead of adorning his crown with regular jewels, why not incorporate luminar crystals into them? That would not only bestow the crown with a cool light effect, but would also make it a bit more spiritually reactive!

He could even turn it into a hidden weapon!

Ves imagined a scenario where Rion was cornered by enemies, only for them to get blasted by laser beams that streaked out of the dwarven emperor's crown!

"Hahaha, that's a cool idea! I should add it to the list!"

There was only one snag. Ves only knew how to make second-class luminar crystals right now, but this was because he never had access to higher-quality materials and equipment.

Yet now that Rion provided him with a complete first-class workshop, Ves could quickly start making crystals out of genuine first-class exotics! That way, he would get something substantial out of this commission that he could take back to his clan and sit on until he found an opportunity to reproduce the formula for his own purposes!

The best part about this move was that the dwarves would effectively be funding his research! Ves did not need to pay for any of the goods and equipment used to develop a first-class luminar crystal!

#### *Chapter 3352: Publicly Funded Research*

Previously, Ves thought that this commission was a difficult and unpleasant challenge.

After all, who wanted to be forced to work with a gun pointed at his head? No mech designer or craftsman would feel good at being exploited for someone else's gain!

It was only now that his opinion began to turn around. Ves slowly swept his gaze across the entire workshop.

The first-class equipment not only consisted of production equipment that could easily process extremely strange and difficult materials, but also encompassed a couple of useful lab machines!

The latter was highly crucial to anyone who wanted to perform experiments or develop a new innovation. With all this lab equipment at his disposal, Ves would be able to investigate how different materials reacted to each other and find out which one of them possessed the qualities that turned them into suitable raw materials for luminar crystals.

Though Ves did not consider himself to be a true specialist in luminar technology, all of that knowledge dumped into his mind after he acquired the relevant Sub-Skills from the System came in really handy at this time.

The expertise he gained from them were so thorough and comprehensive that he reluctantly judged that he was capable of researching new luminar crystal formulas!

"There are constraints, though."

He tempered his expectations a little after he realized that he would have to work under three major constraints.

First, he lacked way too much time to explore this avenue at his leisure. With only a day at his disposal, there was no way he could devote a proper amount of time to develop any good formulas! At best, he would just have to settle for his first success and move on from that point.

Second, the quality of materials gathered by Rion and his organization was high, but their quantity and variety left much to be desired. First-class materials that even the Terrans and Rubarthans did not disdain were not cheap.

The only reason why the Iron Emperor was even able to amass this modest collection of expensive materials was because he only intended to obtain a first-class crown.

If Rion wanted to fund the development of a first-class mech, the sheer amount of materials he had to buy or redeem from the MTA would likely drain the Vulcan Empire's wealth to such an extent that its citizens would have definitely turned against the central authority!

Third, Ves did not forget that he was working for a client now. He could not blatantly embezzle other people's assets and resources to advance his own research gains! He had to make sure that his experimental results tied back to the emperor's crown. If not, Rion would surely have something to say about Vulcan's antics!

All of these factors dimmed Ves' enthusiasm a bit, but not enough to put out his passion.

He could still work with these restrictions. As long as he cut a few corners and worked as efficiently as possible, he could complete this commission in a way that allowed him to make his mark!

"If Rion can truly pull off his masterplan..."

Though Ves still thought that the revived dwarf was being way too ambitious, what if dwarvenkind truly managed to stand on their own stubby legs?



Wouldn't their highest and most respected leader be seen wearing an artifact crafted by Ves?

Mech designers did not yearn for immortality. That was impossible. What passionate people like Ves truly wanted was to leave a legacy behind. They wanted to make the most out of their lifespan and affect their society and the rest of the galaxy in a way that allowed them to be remembered throughout the ages!

This was true immortality to people. Few ambitious people wanted to live a mundane life and pass away without doing anything that had meaning.

Although Ves primarily wanted to base his legacy around the greatness of his mech designs and what mech pilots managed to accomplish with his machines, he did not reject the opportunity to build up a different legacy among the dwarves.

If the Iron Emperor truly became the father of a new independent dwarven empire, then a huge number of dwarves would be able to admire his crown!

Just the thought of it made him excited in a way that tugged at his craftsman's heart.

"I can't possibly settle for a boring design."

Ves decisively threw out his initial intention to design a safe and boring crown. Of course, that didn't mean he could go wild and design a product that did not sit well with Rion.

What he needed to do was to stick with the classical style, but put his spin on it. Ves began to think what kind of features he could impart on the crown that reflected his strengths.

"I should definitely incorporate luminar crystal in its design."

The only question was how much. He could add a few larger gemstones on the base or on the spiky protrusions. He could also form lines with lots of smaller gemstones. Furthermore, if he happened to need more extravagance, he could encrust the entire surface of the crown with sparkling gems!

"In fact, why not make the entire crown out of luminar crystals entirely? If it worked for my luminar crystal rifle, it should work for this crown as well!"

However, Ves quickly suppressed this ridiculous notion. He would have to develop several different formulas to create components of different properties and that was way too time and labor-intensive.

Also, a dainty and girly crown made of dazzling jewel-like materials did not fit a dour, gruff and imposing dwarven leader such as Rion.



When Ves glanced up at his 'employer' for a moment, he immediately gained an impression of a powerful sovereign who was solid, domineering, masculine and utterly confident in himself.

The crown that Ves intended to make needed to complement these traits. This would make the Iron Emperor appear larger than life, giving people the illusion that he stood on a greater height.

"It has to have a solid, metal construction. Dwarven heads are larger and broader than human heads and Rion has a particularly masculine look. He's also bald and doesn't wear a beard like other dwarves so I need to make sure the style of the crown takes that into account."

One of the other requirements of the crown was that Rion had to be able to wear it with or without a helmet. Fortunately, Ves didn't have to incorporate any complicated mechanisms to accomplish that. Whoever was responsible for developing the Iron Emperor's personal wargear would automatically adapt the helmet to the crown.

What Ves needed to take into account was that the crown still had to be distinguishable on Rion's huge and bulky armored form.

If the crown was too small, then hardly any dwarf would be able to notice whether the emperor wore his symbol of authority.

On the other hand, if the crown was too big, then it would look way too excessive on Rion's bald and naked head. It would be like a young kid wearing his parent's hat! Such an impression was counterproductive as it made the Iron Emperor look as if he was trying way too hard.

"Hmmm... how can I reconcile these two competing demands?" Ves rubbed his smooth-shaven chin.

He began to call up a design interface from the workshop terminal. At first glance, it wasn't that much different from the ones he was accustomed to working with. The only major difference was that it had access to a much larger database and that its math-intensive functions were backed by an impressive degree of processing power.

Ves' eyes lit up. "This little ship possesses more processing power than the Spirit of Bentheim!"

He couldn't imagine how much energy the processors of the dwarven frigate consumed at maximum power. The infrastructure required to host such powerful systems was definitely extravagant.

"I can't underestimate this frigate. She might even be a quasi-first-class starship!"

Ves no longer let himself become distracted by these matters and earnestly began to sketch out a couple of draft designs.

He did not think too much about the material composition or the extraordinary features of the crown. He just wanted to pin down the visuals and aesthetics of his product first so that he could find a sweet spot where its size wasn't too big or small.

"This is harder than it looks."

After forming a few hasty sketches that he didn't like, Ves ultimately concluded that it was better to start on the small side rather than the opposite.

He could always make a crown look bigger and bulkier by adding elements to its design. It was a lot harder to make a crown appear smaller in the same fashion.

"Adding height is a pretty good way to make the crown look bigger without altering fit."

Ves had tried to increase the diameter of the crown, but that would just lead to problems if Rion tried to wear it without a helmet. He found that it was much easier to achieve his goal if he just extended the height of the crown.

In his latest sketch, he thickened the band and placed twelve different blocky protrusions on top of that. The design gained a distinctive masculine dwarven look because of these design choices.

When Ves called up a model of dwarf and put the crown on its head, he became quite satisfied with this aesthetic. The thick and weighty crown was a little on the bulky side and made it seem as if the dwarven head was surrounded by a crenelated castle wall.

"It's a little too plain and unrefined for now, but the crown is unmistakably dwarven in style."

One of the requirements that Rion imposed on Ves was to avoid making it seem that the crown was made by a human. Everyone who gazed at it had to be convinced that it was made by a supreme dwarven artisan!

Otherwise, a scandal might erupt once people found out that the Iron Emperor's most important symbol of authority came from a human!

Once Ves finished tweaking the contours of his sketch, he needed to embellish it with further details.

"The crown of an emperor of an entire species shouldn't be too shabby. Right now, my work looks as if it could have been made by any metalworker."

This was where his creativity and artistic streak came in. Ves had several different options at his disposal.

He initially decided to treat the outer surface of the crown as a metal storyboard where he could carve in different decorative elements. This was his favorite way of making a plain piece of metal look grander.

However, much of the finer workmanship on the crown would become indistinguishable from a distance. Considering that Rion would be holding a lot of public events where he wore his crown, Ves had to make the crown look impressive even if someone was watching the emperor from the back of the crowd.

"I have at least two possible choices. First, I can limit the detail work to larger and simpler carvings. Maybe I can carve mysterious runes around the crown."

The direction was good, but it was not a good choice to settle for runes. The dwarven people had not developed their own language and script. Ves would have to invent runes on the spot and add meaningless symbols to what was supposed to be one of his greater and more impressive works.

However, aside from dwarf-inspired runes, there weren't many other options that Ves could use to embellish the crown.

This was why he intended to combine it with the second choice, which was to employ different colors.

Ves couldn't go overboard with adding lots of colors to his design, but a simple two-toned or three-toned metallic construction should do the job.

That would still make the crown look rather tame, though.

"Maybe I can add a bit of flair as well."

He could add metallic wings to the side or even add horns to the crown to give it a more savage look.

"Let's see what works and what doesn't work... I have lots of possible choices so there has to be some that will fit this specific situation."

#### *Chapter 3353: Crown Design*

As time passed by outside the dwarven frigate, the Golden Skull Alliance had already retracted half of their mechs.

It did not make much sense to keep so many mech pilots in such a stressful position. The Olympus Mons had already exhibited so much power that the humans simply couldn't overcome its might.

If that was the case, they might as well take it easy. They all realized that they had turned into hostages. Since Ves already called in and informed everyone that the dwarves would let them go after a time, the threat of death no longer hung so closely over their heads.

Of course, Ves had declined to mention the difficulty of his task and the consequences of failure. If the expeditionary members knew that the Iron Emperor was willing to have them all killed if he did not get his way, the oblivious humans wouldn't have relaxed their guard to this extent!

At this time, two expert pilots stood silently in the observation chamber of the Spirit of Bentheim. Both of them were still suited in their piloting suits due to the current alert state, but neither of them had any illusions about their chances in battle.

Ordinarily, Venerable Joshua didn't like to be around his ex-girlfriend. Venerable Jannzi had changed too much as she dedicated herself to her calling. Their opinions on Ves, the direction of the clan and other topics diverged too much for them to find each other's company pleasant.

This was a different occasion, though. The utter defeat inflicted upon the Larkinson Clan today weighed heavily on their minds.

The fact that their contribution in their attempt to resist the Olympus Mons was too marginal caused both of them to have a lot in common this time!

As a result, neither of them minded each other's presence at this time.

Venerable Joshua stared out in the direction of the Olympus Mons. "I wonder if we could have repelled the Olympus Mons if we finally obtained our expert mechs."

"Unlikely." Jannzi said. "An ace mech can easily deal with expert mechs in the same way we can clean up regular mechs. Our mechs would all get crushed no matter what fancy tricks our patriarch has prepared."

Both of them envied the strength displayed by Saint Mayorka. Her domain field and her ace mech had made a strong impression on every mech pilot, but the expert pilots were particularly affected due to their ability to make direct comparison to their own level of strength.

Jannzi and Joshua had always known that the gap between an expert pilot and an ace pilot was big. Now that they witnessed the power of the latter in person, they understood

that they had still underestimated how much stronger an ace pilot could actually be. Not even the Larkinson Clan's battle formation could be their equal!

"I thought that borrowing the power of the Superior Mother and the like would be enough for us to defend against other hostile ace mechs." Joshua gripped his fists.

"You're not the only one who thought that way. We all got complacent. We were too ignorant. If Saint Mayorka hadn't taught us a lesson, then some other ace pilot would have done the same. Sooner or later, Ves' reckless behavior will put us in conflict against a group that can field an ace mech. We need to step up when that happens."

"That will take a long time, Jannzi. I want to become an ace pilot more than anything now that it's clear our clan needs the protection of one, but... we're too far away."

Both of them had only advanced to expert pilot more than a year ago. They only piloted prime mechs until then and did not have an opportunity to truly channel their new strength as of yet. Their growth had stalled, leaving them far closer to the starting line than they wished.

Even if they obtained their expert mechs, they still had many years or decades ahead of them before they even came close to reaching the next threshold!

Venerable Jannzi remained stoic as she crossed her arms. "We'll have to leave this job to other expert pilots. Patriarch Reginald Cross is the most likely candidate to become an ace pilot. He can break through pretty soon if he is lucky enough. The only issue is that he's not a Larkinson. Though he seems to be an honorable enough sort, the way he disregards the lives of his own clansmen is just as bad as Ves. I can never respect a person who is willing to sacrifice his own dependents to fulfill an ambition."

"Well, our clan isn't exactly swelling with powerful expert pilots." Joshua said. "The most promising one among us is Venerable Stark. She's older and much further ahead than us. Ever since she obtained her masterwork expert mech, her resonance strength has been surging by a lot. She's measuring at 27 laves last I checked."

This was an explosive level of growth considering that Davia Stark had only obtained the Amaranto roughly half a year ago. Though her rate of improvement was already starting to slow down, she would still be able to reach the threshold of a high-tier expert pilot within a handful of years as long as nothing went wrong!

"Getting a masterwork expert mech is our only chance." Venerable Jannzi observed. "If any of us obtains an expert mech that can equal the Amaranto, we can quickly become the pillar the Larkinson Clan needs in order to maintain its security in the Red Ocean. Hardly any pioneer wants to risk any forces against an ace mech that is comparable in strength to the Olympus Mons."

This was her current goal at the moment. Venerable Jannzi had always felt driven to protect the Larkinsons against threats, both from within and without. Now that she learned how much better an ace pilot could withstand much greater threats, she hungered to attain this power for herself!

Whether the Larkinson mech designers managed to transform the Shield of Samar into a masterwork or not, Jannzi was determined to catch up or overtake Venerable Stark!

After all, Venerable Stark was ultimately a guest pilot who had always made it clear that she was not a part of the clan. Since she was a strong-willed expert pilot, the Larkinsons hadn't even tried to persuade her to stay and join the Larkinson. The former citizen of the Vindmar Republic was too haunted by her own trauma and tragedies to let go of her vendetta.

Though both Jannzi and Joshua yearned to obtain a masterwork expert mech just like the Amaranto, they both understood that the chances of getting their way was too low. It was unfair to put unrealistic expectations on Ves and the other mech designers of the Larkinsons due to their previous successes.

"If any of us obtain a masterwork expert mech, we have to shoulder a greater responsibility. If not..."

Then they would just have to rely on their own efforts to defy the odds!

Back inside the dwarven frigate, their patriarch was occupied with making a different kind of masterwork.

"Damn, there's too much choice when it comes to designing a crown."

Ves did not have a lot of time at his disposal, so he tried to rush the initial concept creation as much as possible.

He did not consider a lot of alternative choices because it took way too much time to properly consider them all. Regardless, whenever he envisioned a crown, he could think of at least a hundred different design elements that he could add to his design.

It was hard to settle for one choice over another since many of them already looked fairly good.

He browsed a lot of images of existing crowns on the galactic net and opened his eyes to the works of other artisans. Each crown maker applies different ideas to enhance the majesty of whoever wore their creations. Ves gained a lot of inspiration from these examples, but none of them quite reflected his own ideas.

Ves merely used them as tools to narrow down his own choices.

"Tall crowns can look quite good and they have an even better effect on dwarves."

"I don't have to be afraid of using up a lot of materials. Dwarves are so strong that they can surely handle a bit of weight on their heads."

"The metal of most crowns primarily come in a single tone, but that doesn't mean I should stick with that as well. I can use two tones and still make my crown look exceptional as long as there is enough contrast."

Slowly but surely, Ves began to design a rather tall and heavy crown that looked more like a solid block of metal than a slender headband. Though he hadn't made any decisions when it came to its material composition, he wanted to come up with an alloy that looked metallic grey.

In order to spice up the crown, Ves designed its upper materials to come in a reddish tint. At some angles, it made the crown look as if it was drenched in blood, which he found highly appropriate considering how many Vulcanites Rion was willing to sacrifice for his ambitions.

Along with the dwarven-styles shapes which culminated in a raised front section that extended into a hammerhead, the entire crown looked utterly unique and different from any other symbol of authority that Ves had ever seen!

Ves added a bit of detail work to the front as well. He carved a small depiction of Vulcan to explicitly tie the crown to the God of Dwarves, Mechs and Craftsmanship.

If it ever fell into someone else's hands, it wouldn't do for others to mistake the original purpose of the crown and put it on the head of a human monarch!

"Rion! Please take a look at this sketch. Are you happy with the style of my proposed design?"

The Iron Emperor had always been keeping an eye on his guest's progress. He already formed an opinion of what Ves had made.

"YOU ARE TAKING A BOLD RISK BY USING MULTIPLE TONES ON A SINGLE CROWN. I DID NOT ENVISION MYSELF WEARING SUCH A DISTINCT PIECE. I CANNOT SAY I LIKE IT, BUT IF YOU ARE ABLE TO MAKE IT WORK, THEN I WILL NOT OBJECT TO WEARING YOUR WORK."

The dwarven leader pointed out a couple of elements that he wanted to change. He didn't want to make the crown too heavy and he also wanted Ves to pare back on the amount of reddish alloy he intended to use. He was fine with the overall style of the crown and he did not mind the luminar crystals either, so Ves didn't need to make any changes in that regard.



"I AM IMPRESSED, VULCAN. I ANTICIPATED THAT YOU WOULD FIND IT DIFFICULT TO EMULATED A DWARVEN DESIGN STYLE. IT APPEARS MY FEARS WERE UNFOUNDED. YOU HAVE ADAPTED TO OUR AESTHETICS LIKE A FISH TO WATER."

"Hehehe, I've interacted with many dwarves. I'm familiar with what you guys tend to like." Ves nervously laughed.

In truth, Ves leaned heavily on his incarnation to feel what would work in a dwarven crown. Vulcan was made with dwarven ingredients, so the powerful design spirit and by extension Ves was able to draw on this aspect to understand dwarven tastes.

After obtaining permission to go through with his current design proposal, Ves began to turn to another important design aspect.

"It's time for me to look at the materials I can use."

He moved over to the storage cabinets and began to survey the different metallic exotics and other expensive materials.

Ves didn't have a clear idea yet which ones were suitable to be used in his crown.

"Most of these materials lean on the denser side."

That could be a problem, especially considering that his proposed crown was not small.

"I shouldn't worry too much. Rion received a lot of augmentation... He can easily bear all of this weight."

#### *Chapter 3354: First-Class Materials*

Rion and his group amassed quite an impressive collection of first-class materials. Though none of them came in greater quantities, a crown was not that large to begin with. This was also the primary reason why the dwarves were able to amass a decent collection.

"This is practically a gourmet for Lucky!"

His cat rarely ate materials that were as extravagant as the samples in front of Ves. He bet that Lucky would probably grow incredibly upset at missing the opportunity to devour so many delicious snacks!

"Oh well..."

Ves reminded himself that he was still working on the clock. He couldn't waste too much time on getting fascinated by all of the wealth on display.

He soon grew serious as he began to study the most important properties and merits of each material. Though the selection of materials was not particularly impressive in the inventory of a first-class mech designer, the caliber was unquestionably higher than that of second-class materials!

"The primary criteria that determine the class of a material is how much value their properties bring. Their rarity doesn't play a role. As long as at least one aspect of them is powerful enough to be used in first-class products, they are classified as first-class materials."

What this essentially meant was that there were no useless first-class materials. The practice of dividing materials into three categories was a human construct to begin with, so there was no way that anyone could obtain less valuable first-class materials as a bargain.

"Let's begin with the ones that caught my eye."

As its name suggested, EFV-343 was an artificial alloy made out of a formula of several different exotic materials. It was a fairly old and well-known material that humanity had developed in the early days of the Age of Conquest.

It soon turned into a popular and widely-used first-class alloy due to its usefulness and the relative ease in sourcing the raw materials required to make it. This was also the reason why it was affordable enough for Rion to purchase a sample.

"If I have enough EFV-343 at my disposal, I could create a powerful energy weapon!"

EFV-343 had many different applications and was most widely used to make high-end electrical components. Although the physical durability of the material was average, it possessed an insanely high tolerance for heat, electricity and many other forms of energy.

The simplest way to describe it was that it was both a sponge and a pipe for energy. It was able to store energy naturally like a battery or heat sink. It could even hold multiple forms of energy at the same time. Depending on how it was manipulated or incorporated into an object, it could selectively channel a specific type of energy to another destination in an instant with remarkably high efficiency.

Although all of these functions sounded rather basic, a creative engineer or mech designer could employ EFV-343 in many brilliant ways!

Right now, Ves was thinking on how he could make use of EFV-343 to create a natural mechanism to power the luminar crystals of his crown. They could also be employed as a form of protection against excessive heat or other powerful energies.

This was a crucial material if Ves wanted to add a powerful extra function to his crown. Since Rion's prohibited him from incorporating any obvious technological components in his design, he could only take a step back and rely on the natural properties of materials to increase the utility of the device.

"I don't want to make a purely ornamental piece. A crown of this expense should always have a few surprises."

Ves already planned to turn the luminar crystals added to the crown into hidden energy beam projectors. Although their power might not be as powerful as dedicated first-class weapons, they would definitely give any attacker a surprise.

"Let's see what other uses I can add to the crown."

Whoever named Extreme Cold Titanium apparently lacked imagination. However, it was an apt description for this high-grade exotic. It was a lot harder than titanium but shared the same density and other properties of this mundane element.

What caused Extreme Cold Titanium to stand out was that it apparently broke the laws of thermodynamics just by existing!

According to the first law of thermodynamics, the sum of energy levels inside a closed system should be constant.

However, any system that incorporated Extreme Cold Titanium ultimately lost a lot of energy over time.

This was because the exotic just sucked in lots of energy, particularly heat, and caused it to disappear into nowhere!

"It's a fantastic material to use as a heat sink!"

Extreme Cold Titanium was universally popular in all first-class circles for this reason. Although it had its limitations such as limits to its rate of energy absorption, it was still a fantastic way to persistently cool parts that tended to generate a lot of heat over time.

As long as Ves employed a bit of Extreme Cold Titanium in his crown, he could employ heat or energy-generating materials without any concern for overheating.

"After all, my crown is not supposed to cook the head of its wearer as if it was an egg!"

The only downside to employing Extreme Cold Titanium was that it was active all the time. If left alone in a closed room, it could freeze the local temperature until it was close to absolute zero!

This was a known problem and humanity developed many different solutions to prevent Extreme Cold Titanium from creating disasters.

Ves looked intrigued when he regarded these two basic but incredibly useful exotics.

"I can already do a lot by combining EFV-343 and Extreme Cold Titanium. I just need to pick up both a source of energy and another material that does something useful."

He swept his eyes towards Histam alloy, which was named after its inventor. Just like EFV-343, it was an artificial material with highly useful properties.

However, compared to the other two materials, Histam alloy was a lot less flashy. It only stood out for its superior durability. If Ves was interpreting the specs on the projected information panel correctly, Histam alloy was actually a lot tougher and more resilient than Unending alloy!

"A mech made out of Histam alloy would be a tough nut to crack." Ves imagined.

Histam alloy also enjoyed another advantage compared to Unending alloy. Ves had no idea how to make the latter, but the former was already a well-known material.

If Ves didn't have any better choices, then it was completely acceptable to make use of Histam alloy as the base material for his crown. It would add a lot of durability to the end product, ensuring that no matter what crises or perils it endured, the crown of the dwarves would always remain intact!

Still, Ves was reluctant to settle on Histam alloy because it brought nothing else to the table.

"It's also a dense and heavy material. I don't know if Rion's head can hold that much heavy metal under heavy gravity conditions."

Ves mentally put Histam alloy on the pending list and moved on to studying another material.

Ireon B was a natural exotic that was often found alongside its more precious and rarer A variant.

Ireon A was highly desirable because it was a lot more potent due to its purity. The problem was that deposits of this rather rare exotic were largely tainted and mixed with other materials. It was too hard to find significant amounts of pure substances.

The larger quantities of Ireon B found in these deposits were weaker and not as potent. Many first-raters even regarded it as substandard materials and would never think of using it in their mech designs or other products!

"There's nothing wrong with Ireon B, though." Ves shrugged. "It just isn't as impressive as its big brother."

The main use of Ireon B was to form a natural energy shield!

Yes, an energy shield!

A single piece of processed Ireon B could project a protective energy shield that possessed much of the same functionality as a shield generator!

In fact, many people theorized that the tech behind shield generators was originally derived from studying the working principles of Ireon B.

There were several differences between a conventional shield generator and this exotic.

First, the former was operated by a powerful AI or clever programming. It was able to be selective about what was permitted to pass through the energy shield. A typical example was light and air.

While the simplest application of Ireon B was also capable of projecting an energy shield, the problem was that it blocked everything! Anyone who wore a device that was centering around this exotic wouldn't be able to perceive what was happening outside due to a lack of light!

The exotic also cut off air circulation which might or might not pose a hindrance.

All of this meant that a shield based on Ireon B worked well as an energy barrier, but it could not be relied upon to fight an extended battle.

"It's still a good tool to guard against assassination strikes."

Someone as arrogant and ambitious as Rion Aaden would make enemies sooner or later. He wanted to unite as many dwarves as possible, and some of them might not take kindly to a rival who wanted to usurp their men.

It would be a shame for the Iron Emperor to perish early because of insufficient defense.

"Rion is an emperor, not a soldier." Ves muttered. "The various downsides related to Ireon B aren't as relevant to a non-combatant."

Still, it was quite tricky to incorporate Ireon B into the crown. Ves had to make sure it created an energy shield on command. It shouldn't be projecting any energy shields when there was no need to put up a defense.

"Maybe I can mitigate the other problems if I make use of a clever combination."

The rather silly-sounding Copenhagen Copper quickly aroused Ves' interest for a couple of reasons.

It was a natural nemesis towards signals. It generated a natural interference field that was able to scramble nearly all forms of communication. Fortunately, there was a way to neutralize this property, or else Rion would have to put down his crown each time he wanted to receive remote transmissions!

However, this was not enough to arouse his greed. What truly attracted him towards Copenhagen Copper was that it was also able to disturb many if not all forms of teleportation, displacement and materialization phenomena within a decent range!

This would prevent Rion from being teleported against his will. Copenhagen Copper was also able to prevent nearby materializations. This was a good way to prevent an assassination attempt by materializing a bomb close to the high-value target!

"The only annoying part is that Rion has to manually switch off these settings every time he wants to teleport or materialize something in his presence."

These were decent tradeoffs even if the dwarven emperor was able to rely on other tools to block teleportation.

"Damn, all of these first-class materials are so useful. They're so tempting to incorporate in my crown!"

Aside from maybe Histom alloy, Ves already hungered to make use of the other exotics or alloys he surveyed so far! With plenty of more materials to study, Ves knew that he would find it much harder to limit his section!

"I need to pare back my choices. The crown shouldn't do everything. There are other specialized gadgets out there that can block teleportation or project an energy shield."

Ves realized that most of his ideas surrounding his crown tended to focus on self-defense.

He was projecting himself too much in Rion's shoes. Due to his paranoia, Ves was always eager to increase his ability to defend against threats.

"Someone who can afford to purchase all of these first-class materials isn't lacking in solutions!"

Ves realized that it was a better idea to focus on more esoteric and unique abilities that others couldn't easily replicate.

An interesting question emerged in his mind.

"Are any of these materials spiritually reactive?"

*Chapter 3355: Galenta Bone*

Were there any spiritually-reactive materials among Rion's collection of high-grade materials?

The probability that this might be the case was low, but Ves did not rule it out entirely.

At this point, he had already come in touch with a decent variety of second-class materials. He possessed enough knowledge to know that while second-class exotics possessed fairly remarkable and maybe unique properties, pretty much none of them interacted with spiritual energy in a special way.

Up until this point, the few spiritually-reactive exotics that Ves had encountered mostly emerged from the Nyxian Gap. Ves was afraid that special materials such as P-stone, F-stone, B-stone and Unending alloy could only be found in or around a single unique region.

The current pattern suggested that spiritually-reactive materials rarely if ever emerged naturally in the galaxy. Only by heading into strange and anomalous regions comparable to the Nyxian Gap would he be able to find the materials he needed to incorporate spiritual engineering in his material products.

"Hopefully that's not the case."

This was just a theory for now. Ves only came in touch with a fraction of the exotics available in any given region. There were so many different varieties of natural and artificial materials available that it was impossible for Ves to acquaint himself with all of them in a short amount of time!

Ves didn't have the time to visit all of the exotic marketplaces and scour the offerings of rare, unique and newly-discovered exotics in person. At the very least, he did not plan to do so during his journey to the gate system.

He would have plenty of time to do so in the Red Ocean. After all, the dwarf galaxy would become his new stomping grounds for an extended amount of time. He needed to familiarize himself with all of the available specialty products so that he could design and produce mechs that fit the local circumstances.

"The materials used to produce my existing designs such as the Bright Warrior, Transcendent Punisher and Eternal Redemption might not be available in the Red Ocean." Ves frowned. "Even if they are, their rarity and availability may be different, which will all affect the production cost of my designs."



It was definitely necessary to adapt every mech design to the environment. This was a necessary process in every star sector and star cluster. The greater the distance, the greater the divergence in resource availability and distribution. This also made it necessary for large mech companies to develop variants adapted to each major region.

"Well, I can think about that later. Right now, I need to focus on my crown project."

Although Ves felt an enormous attraction to each first-class material at his disposal, he realized he shouldn't get dazzled by them. The crown he intended to design didn't need to fulfill so many ordinary functions.

If Ves wanted to make a special crown that no other craftsman could replicate, then he needed to invest it with unique powers!

"I don't need to add an energy shield or teleportation blocker to this crown." He muttered. "The luminar crystals can stay, though."

Ves intended to do something special with them as long as he was able to develop a first-class formula in the short amount of time he had available.

He had already spotted various exotics that were similar to the materials used in the more common formulas of second-class luminar crystals.

Although this didn't guarantee that Ves was able to combine them into a newer and stronger version of those crystals, he was willing to invest a couple of hours to see if he could pull it off. Even if the firepower of the luminar crystals wasn't particularly impressive, they still looked pretty enough to adorn an expensive crown.

"Well, let's see if I can find any materials that work especially with my talents."

Ves no longer surveyed the first-class materials one by one but swept the entire cabinet with his spiritual senses. He put quite a bit of power in his inspection in order to make sure he didn't miss any fluctuations.

He wouldn't have been able to do this if Saint Yila Mayorka still covered the entire workshop with her will-infused domain field. Fortunately, she retracted her presence and gave him enough room for him to cover the material cabinets.

Ves already noticed that these cabinets were not average. They were not only made out of hard and isolating materials, but they also segregated and contained every single sample so that their energy fluctuations or other influences did not affect each other.

The cabinets also possessed formidable anti-theft features. Breaking into them was hard and would certainly trip up an alarm. Even if a sneaky bastard like Lucky attempted to nibble on the exotics, various sensors would automatically detect any displacement or decrease in mass and immediately broadcast an alert.

"I should get one of these as well."

Ves was different from most snoopers. Whoever developed these material cabinets never accounted for spiritual methods of investigation.

This allowed Ves to perform a thorough and all-encompassing sweep without too many scruples. He swept all of the cabinets without too much expectation. The odds of encountering relevant goods was too small.

"Huh?"

Much to his surprise, he not only encountered a single reaction, but two different ones!

He froze for a moment before he cautiously investigated the materials that gave out a response.

They were placed in different places, which meant that their properties differed substantially from each other.

One of the spiritually-reactive materials gave out a vibe that Ves found vaguely familiar. Whenever he injected spiritual energy in this unknown material, it began to store it just like a P-stone!

"No, it's not just that. There's also a nourishing effect!"

Ves felt a much greater affinity towards this material than a regular P-stone. His breath heaved as he familiarized himself with this strange new material that exhibited a wonderful and extremely useful interaction with spiritual energy.

From the way it invigorated and preserved the quality of spiritual energy, Ves felt as if the unknown exotic was alive.

This was a much better material to store active spirits or the remains of spiritual entities!

So far, Ves had only come across two materials that possessed spiritual energy storage characteristics. Whether it was P-stone or Unending alloy, both of them gave him the impression that they were simple containers that stored or locked spiritual energy without doing anything special.

If the previous two spiritual storage exotics were comparable to huts, this third exotic was like a mansion!

Ves came up with many possible guesses of what this newly-discovered exotic could do for him. If he incorporated it into his Hammer of Brilliance and other important artifacts, the growth of his various design spirits might accelerate!

He couldn't suppress his patience any longer. He drew out the relevant drawer and inspected the material that gave him so many surprises.

"It's... organic?"

It was a bone-like material to be exact. The brownish, non-metallic exotic was loosely shaped like a human foot.

Although the exotic didn't look particularly attractive, Ves' eyes shone as he confirmed that this was the material that could potentially solve his lack of spiritual storage materials.

As long as this first-class material could be bought through regular channels, Ves would have a way to empower more mechs with prime resonance capabilities!

This was especially important for his future expert mechs as there was no way the Larkinson Clan would only host half-a-dozen of them. With plenty of expert candidates in the clan, Ves would definitely add more expert mechs to the roster sooner or later.

Ves eagerly read the property panel of this bone-like material.

"So it's called Galenta Bone!"

Galenta Bone was called this way because it looked like a bone and because it was only found in the brains of large and mature galenta space whales.

The galenta space whale was an astral beast species that were fairly rare but could be found everywhere in the Milky Way.

In fact, galenta space whales had already been found in the Red Ocean! This suggested that the natural habitat of this astral beast species encompassed multiple main galaxies.

"This is good news!"

Astral beasts mostly consisted of large alien organisms that weren't smart enough to develop their own civilization and mostly lived in space.

They were the spaceborn version of exobeasts. Due to the challenges of living in a harsh, vacuum environment, there weren't many species of astral beasts, but each one was strong and exceptional in several ways. Otherwise, they wouldn't have been able to sustain themselves in an environment that was extremely hostile to most living organisms!

According to the information panel, Ves found out that galenta space whales were actually terrifying astral beasts that possessed various special combat abilities depending on their diet.

Similar to Lucky, their bodies were able to develop different powers based on the exotics that they had eaten!

This was also why galenta space whales grew more powerful over time. The most formidable alpha galenta space whales were so difficult to resist that only warships and a lot of first-class mechs were able to defeat them in open combat!

The so-called Galenta Bone was one of the many strange exotic materials that could be harvested from alpha galenta space whales. Much to Ves' dismay, it did not occur in any younger and less mature astral beasts.

"Damn. It looks like I won't be going on a whale hunt anytime soon."

What was strange about Galenta Bone was that humans who harvested it from the whales hadn't found anything special about it. The hardness of the material was not impressive and ranked at the bottom for first-class materials.

The only reason why they were valuable at all was because they possessed an inexplicable ability to calm and soothe people's minds when they were incorporated into headgear. However, the effect was relatively modest and many people didn't need such a function.

This was why Rion was able to afford it and why he thought it might be relevant to the making of his crown.

The demand for the product was fairly low due to this reason, which was definitely good news for Ves.

Unfortunately, the supply wasn't impressive either!

Ves frowned when he discovered a crucial fact.

"The population of galenta space whales in the galaxy has dropped!"

Due to their ability to accumulate and assimilate different exotic materials over time, every whale was practically a moving treasure trove. Not just humans, but many other alien species in the past had hunted them down as they roamed the stars!

The most favored way to catch them was when they needed to mate or raise their calves. Due to various reasons, the galenta space whales performed these activities inside certain gas giants, which made it easy for hunters to lay in wait and spring a trap.

After eons of excessive hunting, the population of galenta space whales had dropped so much that they almost became extinct!

These days, hardly anyone bothered to hunt them anymore because they were simply too rare. This had allowed the remarkable astral beasts to recover their numbers a bit, but it was unlikely that they would be able to populate the galaxy as extensively as before.

Galenta space whales posed a hazard to human civilization due to their need to feed on exotics. They occasionally attacked space stations and starships in order to gorge upon them. This was why they could never be allowed to recover their population too much!

There was still hope, though. Although the galenta space whales were almost driven to extinction in the Milky Way, they were a bit more ubiquitous in other galaxies.

In particular, galenta space whales were at least a hundred times more prevalent in the Red Ocean!

"Even if I can't hunt them myself, I can still purchase the Galenta Bone harvested by other groups as long as they show up on the market!"

Ves definitely had to amass a collection of Galenta Bone in order to further his ambitions!

#### *Chapter 3356: Piraester*

This forced commission turned out to be a blessing in disguise. If Ves hadn't been forced to make an imperial crown, he wouldn't have bumped into so many first-class materials so soon.

Galenta Bone was a fairly rare and obscure first-class exotic due its low supply. If Rion wanted to commission a weapon or any other piece of equipment, the likelihood that he would procure a sample of this astral beast remains was much lower!

Compared to other first-class materials, Galenta Bone was a lot less durable and did not provide any other notable benefits.

"Now that I know about it, I'll definitely not let this material go." Ves decided.

He swiped it from the cabinet and placed it aside so that he could process it later. He already developed a couple of ideas on how to make use of its properties.

It was a pity that Rion didn't commission a mech from him. Otherwise, Ves could have designed and built a new prime mech with this astral beast remains!

"These bone exotics are rather strange, though."

Ves was reminded of Rorach's Bone, which shared several similarities to Galenta Bone. Although the naming scheme was slightly different, both of them could be obtained from the remains of long-dead organisms.

In fact, didn't he obtain a sample of high-grade Rorach's Bone a long time ago? Back then, he stumbled upon the remains of a giant, long-dead humanoid species deep inside the Glowing Planet.

Similar to Galenta Bone, Ves managed to obtain the most precious version of Rorach's Bone in the giant humanoid's skull!

Was this a coincidence, or was there some kind of rule behind this phenomenon?

Ves narrowed his eyes. "Could it be that every organism with a high degree of strength develops a strange bone in their heads?"

If that was the case, Ves wouldn't necessarily have to hunt for galenta space whales in the future. He just needed to harvest whatever strange bones emerged inside the skulls of spiritually powerful beasts!

In fact, why limit his search to exobeasts and astral beasts? What if these bones emerged in sentient and intelligent life forms as well?

"Wait a minute. These bones can't be that ubiquitous!"

Ves never heard of any high-ranking mech pilots or mech designers growing any weird organs inside their heads. There were many other species that were spiritually powerful as well but no one ever talked about any strange head bones.

People either kept this phenomenon a secret or it simply didn't occur very often. Ves was more inclined to believe in the latter, especially when he read that Galenta Bone only showed up in older and more powerful alpha galenta space whales.

Even so, Ves planned to order his clan to pay more attention to any strange exotics that could only be found inside the heads of different alien species.

If there were any other beasts that shared the same characteristic, Ves would definitely try to get his hands on any suspicious bones!

"What a fruitful gain!"

This discovery alone was worth all of the deaths inflicted on the Larkinson Clan this day! Even if Saint Mayorka killed ten times as many Larkinsons, Ves would still think it was a worthwhile tradeoff for the opportunity to get in touch with Galenta Bone!

Once Ves got over his excitement at discovering a new and more accessible material that possessed spiritual storage properties, he shifted his attention to a second material.

Unlike Galenta Bone, the other spiritually-reactive exotic was not organic. It was a metallic material that took on a darker coloration but was not as black as Unending alloy.

Piraester was a metallic substance that was mostly available in the galactic heartland but also showed up in the other parts of the Milky Way.

The bad news was that Piraester had not been found in the Red Ocean as of yet. If the spiritually-reactive material was truly unique to humanity's native galaxy, then Ves would have a lot more difficulty in procuring this material if he stayed in the new frontier.

"It's actually an interesting exotic, though."

On the surface, Piraester was a high-grade exotic that was simply hard. In its pure refined form, it was tougher than both Unending alloy and Galenta Bone, and it was also used to make harder alloys when combined with other exotics.

Unfortunately, Piraester possessed several downsides. The main one was that it did not cope with energy damage as well as physical damage. It had a lower melting point than other defensive first-class materials and was less effective at blocking penetrating radiation.

"It's a good material if you need to fight against dwarven opponents."

The Vulcanites mainly favored physical damage weaponry. Though there were plenty of dwarves that equipped their mechs with laser weapons or positron weapons, they possessed an obvious love for hard-hitting gauss rifles and other kinetic weapons.

Against a state or group that showed such an obvious bias, it was a great idea to design mechs based on materials like Piraester that coped much better against physical damage.

In fact, this was exactly what states such as the Empire of the Lost had done! Many of their military mech models were explicitly designed to fight against their dwarven counterparts, and one of the ways to do so was to clad them with the second-class equivalents to Piraester.

"It's not that useful for a crown, though."

If that was everything that Piraester had to offer, then Ves wouldn't have taken a closer look at it. There were other defensive materials in Rion's collection that offered a more comprehensive resistance profile.



Due to the ubiquity of high technology, first-class mechs tended to make use of a lot of strange weapon systems. Plasma weapons were especially powerful at shorter ranges, and a material that melted fairly easily like Piraester was not a good choice!

"That's not so relevant to me, though."

The reason why Ves paid attention to this rather simple first-class metallic exotic was because it interacted with spirituality in a strange way.

Ves initially didn't know what he was dealing with. He could sense that any spiritual energy that passed through the sample of Piraester somehow became affected by the material.

He initially thought that Piraester disrupted the spiritual energy passing through it. Whatever came out of it turned wobbly and less controllable.

"That's strange."

He suspected that there was more behind Piraester than just exerting a disruptive effect. When he took the sample out of the cabinet, he experimented with it in multiple different ways.

He eventually discovered what Piraester truly did to spiritual energy.

"It focuses the energy that passes through its length!"

Ves became more fascinated by the bar of refined metal as he channeled his spiritual energy from one end to the other end.

The difference between the input and output of spiritual energy was quite substantial. He discovered that any spiritual energy passing through this spiritually-reactive material gradually compressed until the output became much more focused and intense!

"The quality of energy has actually risen!"

This was a massive discovery! Ves had never encountered a material that effectively increased the quality of spiritual energy from a lower state to a higher state.

Of course, the difference was rather marginal. After performing numerous experiments, Ves judged that the maximum possible compression factor that he could obtain with this sample was 1.47.

This was just one of its effects. Piraester also induced a transformation in the energy that caused it to take on traits that Ves frequently encountered in more impressive sources of spiritual energy.

A higher concentration of energy was one of the properties that made universal life energy stand out from other forms of spiritual energy!

Perhaps it was too much to ask for Ves to develop an artificial way to produce the energy that made life-prolonging treatment serum so potent. However, he could still make use of Piraester to develop other applications where supplying a higher quality of spiritual energy would yield drastically better results!

Ves deeply wished he could obtain a large quantity of Piraester so that he could incorporate it into the Amaranto's luminar crystal rifle. He was pretty sure he could develop a way to focus and increase the damage output of this weapon by a substantial degree!

"Maybe I can use it on other mechs as well."

What if he added Piraester to the Decapitator? As long as he managed to pull it off, the masterwork mech sword might be able to channel considerably stronger and sharper resonance manifestations!

"This is a great material to use as a focus or an amplifier!"

The only difficulty was that Ves still had to design new mechanisms around this material. That would take precious time that he mostly didn't have.

He would definitely have to get his hands on more Piraester in the future. Although no one had discovered any source of Piraester in the Red Ocean, it should still be possible to obtain imported samples of this first-class exotic.

After all, a lot of huge capital ships poured into the dwarf galaxy every day. Each of them carried lots of cargo and trade goods in order to meet the huge demand for raw materials in the Red Ocean.

Materials that were solely available in the old galaxy sold for a high premium on the other side of the beyonder gate, so a lot of pioneers tended to stock up on exotics like Piraester in order to help earn back the insanely high cost of passage.

Over time, it would probably get easier for residents in the Red Ocean to get their hands on limited goods such as Piraester. As the Big Two kept collecting more phasewater, they could build more beyonder gates that were larger or more efficient than the current ones.

Phasewater only became widely used a short time ago. Any tech that was based out of this wonderful substance was still crude and unoptimized.

"Hopefully, transit between the galaxies will become cheaper and more affordable in a few decades. Maybe I'll even be able to hop back into the Milky Way without paying tens of millions of MTA merits."

He wasn't in a hurry to return to the old galaxy, though. Why should he go back when he already paid much to get to the new frontier?

"Well, let's get this over with first before I contemplate these other matters. I won't be able to play with these special materials if I can't pass this hurdle!"

Now that Ves became aware of Galeta Bone and Piraester, he did not intend to leave them be. It would be a waste to leave them in the storage cabinets when they possessed such useful properties.

"I can use them both in the crown!"

Ves eagerly pulled up his draft design for the crown and began to flesh it out by specifying the materials used for different sections.

He tried to limit the amount of materials he used for the main structure of the crown as best as possible and settled for a selection of four.

"I'll use EFV-343 as the equivalent of a battery. I'll use Extreme Cold Titanium as the equivalent for a heat sink and a safeguard against excessive heat. I'll use Galeta Bone in order to engineer something special and I'll find a way to use Piraester to amplify its power."

The only element that was missing from this selection was a source of conventional energy. Still, there were so many different power sources available that Ves did not need to make the crown self-sufficient. He could simply design it in a way that it could charge its conventional energy reserves by relying on an external power source.

There was no way that Rion would lack a power outlet.

Ves continually gained new ideas as he increased the detail of his crown design. With the help of the two spiritually-reactive exotics, he had various ways to impart spiritual abilities to the crown. He just needed to develop one that fit its intended purpose.

"What would I want if I was making this crown for myself?"

#### *Chapter 3357: Powerful Crown*

Now that Ves fleshed out his crown design and began to get a solid idea of what he was working towards, he devoted the next couple of hours to solving multiple different problems.

"First, I have to figure out a way to make first-class luminar crystals." Ves muttered. "I'll only devote four hours to this study. If I can't develop any workable formula in this time, I can't waste any further time on what is likely a difficult endeavor."

One of the major limitations that Ves faced was that he did not have access to the crystal cube. Without this piece of alien-derived tech, he wouldn't be able to add internal circuitry to his luminar crystals.

Ves had to make a special request to Rion to allow his subordinates to ship it over to the dwarven frigate.

Of course, Ves would have never brought one of his cherished possessions to enemy territory on a whim. What if the Iron Emperor took a fancy of the crystal cube?

He had to take a risk, though. He was really set on embedding luminar crystals in the crown and only the best would do. Ves could never forgive himself if he employed sub-standard gems when he knew he could have made better ones!

Ves took a careful glance at the upper catwalk. The Iron Emperor constantly paid attention to what took place in the workshop, but he didn't show any particular interest in the crystal cube.

Only someone who was well-versed in luminar crystal technology would be interested in obtaining it. The dwarven race generally wasn't interested in playing around with energy weapons anyway.

"Illustrious One, I'm going to need your help."

Now that he obtained the crystal cube, Ves began to channel the Illustrious One in order to facilitate his research. He began to gather different materials and took small samples from them before using them to synthesize different crystals.

The advanced lab equipment available in the workshop worked remarkably faster than he thought, although Ves first had to read the manuals before he could employ their full capabilities.

"No wonder why they're so expensive. They're huge time savers as well!"

Time was the most valuable resource to mech designers and other people so it made a lot of sense to invest in equipment that could perform a job multiple times faster than usual.

After he found out about this benefit, Ves began to analyze more materials and experiment with combining them together into different products.

He soon discovered another property about first-class materials.

"They're much more energetic than usual." Ves frowned.

This was the source of their strength but also the reason why they were so hard to work with. All of the materials with remarkable effects tended to interact and interfere with each other quite a lot. It was hard to find first-class materials that worked well with each other.

If he forcefully tried to combine different materials with low compatibility, the crystals he made turned into unstable products that were liable to turn into bombs!

In order to proof this assumption, Ves commanded a bot to pick up a small thumb-sized crystal before throwing it against the bulkhead up ahead.

BOOM!

Alarms rang in the workshop as the crystal that had collided against the bulkhead produced an explosion that was powerful enough to create a hole in a typical second-class mech!

The workshop's automated disaster response system quickly came online and isolated the affected area before removing any debris and dangerous materials from the scene. The system also cycled the air and scrubbed any unhealthy contaminants from the local environment.

"Wow."

The crystal he made wasn't even designed with a destructive purpose in mind. If Ves developed a luminar crystal that was expressly meant to explode, what kind of powerful bang could he produce?

"I DID NOT INVITE YOU HERE TO SQUANDER MY VALUABLE MATERIAL RESERVES AND PLAY WITH FIREWORKS. PLEASE CONTINUE TO DEVELOP MY CROWN."

"Hey, this is important research!" Ves defended himself. "I think I know what I got wrong. I can fix this. I promise!"

He was largely telling the truth. The more failures he produced, the more he ruled out unviable options. He had already succeeded with creating luminar crystals out of first-class materials. Ves just needed to apply the existing theory on the material composition of luminar crystals in order to make them. Though they looked dubious, he at least found the right direction.

He just didn't know how to put them together in a stable package as of yet! The selection of materials was generous but far from all-encompassing. The likelihood of finding materials that could moderate or limit the degree of conflict was too low!

In the end, Ves managed to find a viable formula in the nick of time. He first played around with the proportions before selectively adding or removing various different materials. Through trial and error, he somehow discovered a formula that produced a stable first-class luminar crystal!

Ves grinned. "It's definitely possible to make a luminar crystal that is powerful enough!"

The only problem was that Ves already used up a small but significant amount of first-class materials. All of his failed crystals were pretty much impossible to recycle once they were made. If his experiment went on for a couple of weeks, Rion's inventory of high-quality materials would probably be drained!

As it was, Ves had to employ twelve different exotics to create the crystals, which was more than what was proper.

"It's just an initial formula. I bet I can reduce the amount of waste by working on it further."

Now that he gained a proper starting point, Ves was confident that he could increase the power and efficiency of this formula by tweaking the numbers.

The biggest problem of the current formula was that it used up too many expensive materials!

Ves would pretty much bankrupt himself if he attempted to buy a sufficient quantity of all 12 first-class materials used to make his latest crystals!

If he could cut back on the most expensive first-class materials, he could save up a lot of money for future purchases!

For now, he memorized the materials as well as the proportions used to make his first-class luminar crystal.

"It's a pity that it can only discharge a single type of energy." Ves muttered.

Ves based the current crystal on one of his simpler formulas, as the more complicated ones imposed special demands for materials. They were also more difficult to synthesize in order to achieve specific effects.

Right now, when Ves fed the crystal with energy, it discharged a simple but incredibly powerful laser beam!

Although the laser beam wasn't as strong as a full-powered shot from the Amastendira, the sizes of the two objects differed substantially. The Amastendira was as large as other handguns while the experimental crystal that Ves had made was merely a crystal the size of a thumb!

Of course, the crystal alone couldn't shoot out laser beams. Ves also had to address other necessities such as target acquisition, aiming systems, energy supply and heat absorption.

"That's where the rest of the crown comes in." Ves confidently smiled.

Now that he was assured that his crown design would be able to incorporate powerful luminar crystals, Ves completely let himself go and allowed his creativity to run wild as he designed a crown fit for a dwarven sovereign.

Several more hours went by as Ves became completely engrossed in this fascinating project. With Rion footing the bill for everything, he did not worry about any budget limitations at all. The dwarven leader wanted the best and he was quite aware that he couldn't obtain what he wanted if he acted like a cheapskate.

Ves began to combine the four selected materials in a clever way. He used the relatively abundant volume of the crown to hide a lot of little mechanisms that straddled the line between technology and non-technology.

"I'm cheating a bit here." He admitted.

Rion didn't want to obtain a crown made out of existing technology that would grow obsolete after a couple of generations. He wanted to get his hands on a timeless piece of empowered craftsmanship that remained up to date for many centuries!

When Ves understood this exact motivation, he acted a bit cleverly by creating extremely crude mechanisms that mostly relied on the natural properties of the exotics to do most of the work.

"Hmmm... Piraester is a bit challenging to employ in the right conditions, but it is absolutely essential to put it in the crown."

Throughout this design session, Ves discovered another way to increase his understanding.

He pulled out the Hammer of Brilliance and softly hit it against the Piraester sample.

Ves closed his eyes as Vulcan thoroughly scanned Piraester before beginning to decipher its properties and insights on how to use it. The latter part was quite impressive to Ves as he sometimes gained new ways to make use of Piraester that he hadn't thought about himself.

With the help of this useful function, Ves slowly completed the physical design of his crown.

"It's a bit bigger than I initially set out to design."



The crown used to look fairly tall, but Ves increased its weight by adding curled ram horns to the sides.

"Did I go a little overboard with them or is it fine?" He wondered.

The extra horns caused the crown to become heavier even if Ves did his best to make them hollow. However, they looked so great that Ves couldn't bear to remove them from his design.

Ves just had to be more efficient elsewhere if he wanted to keep the weight of the crown under control. He couldn't imagine how much strain Rion would bear if he attempted to wear this crown without a helmet under heavy gravity conditions!

Aside from cutting off more elements of the crown, the only other way to reduce its mass was by employing a material that could offset gravity to an extent.

However, Ves was reluctant to resort to this solution because someone could definitely tamper such a function. Rion's head would become a lot less comfortable if it was forced to bear a huge physical burden!

Once he finished with the physical design of his crown, he began to think about its spiritual design.

"Well, Vulcan must be intimately involved. He can perform a variety of useful tricks."

Vulcan was the God of Dwarves, Mechs and Craftsmanship. Each of these domains meant something to the incarnation and he possessed special powers related to them as a result.

At this time, Ves thought that being the God of Dwarves should bestow Vulcan with a measure of authority over regular dwarves.

He had seen what an effect Vulcan's glow would have on a receptive audience.

His initial task was to translate this effect into his crown design. This wasn't very hard, but Ves wanted his crown to perform more functions based on Vulcan.

He tweaked the spiritual foundation of the crown. Despite his best effects, the spiritual foundation of an ordinary product could never match that of a mech!

Ves did not have much room to work so he could only add a few useful functions to the crown. He had to make a careful selection and rule out plenty of interesting alternatives in the process.

"What does Rion lack the most?"

A means to obtain the loyalty of stubborn dwarves. Belief in Vulcan should help a lot in that regard, but how could Rion distinguish between genuine believers and those who paid lip service?

His crown could help him with that. Ves gained a bold idea in that regard.

"What if I enable Vulcan to descend upon Rion to a degree?"

Something similar had happened before to Rion. Ves refused to think that the System randomly chose the dwarf to be a Mastery host. Perhaps there was something special about him that made it much easier for spiritual entities to enter his mind.

"If my guess is right... I can turn the crown into a device that can literally call on Vulcan to descend!"

This would definitely make the crown stand out... It also solved a fair amount of problems as Ves did not have to rely on the object alone to power its abilities. By borrowing Vulcan's might, he would be able to stuff a lot more power in his work!

#### *Chapter 3358: Divine Vessel*

As Ves continued to design his dwarven crown, he began to think about the meaning of his work.

He was a mech designer by profession. Although he created a lot of other products lately, he never forgot his true purpose.

Even Star Designers, who famously branched out and created all kinds of other products, never abandoned the field they were best at. Designing mechs was the root of their passion and the purpose of all of their hard work.

Although Ves could not even come close to approaching the majesty of a Star Designer, his current activities put him on a similar path.

It was not unusual for mech designers to branch out early and work in other industries. Specialist mech designers often spent time on designing and building specific products or parts that had a relation to their design philosophy.

For example, Ketis mainly focused on designing swordsman mechs, but it was not a waste of time for her to focus specifically on developing swords. The gains she made after creating the Decapitator was great and not much less than if she built a masterwork out of an entire mech!

In that context, what Ves was doing should also be considered an extension of his work.

Similar to how Ketis improved her ability to design swordsman mechs by focusing specifically on swords, Ves realized that he could evolve his ability to design living mechs if he explored the depth of spiritual engineering in different circumstances.

Creating totems was one of the ways he could apply his design philosophy to products other than mechs.

Unlike designing mechs, designing totems was less cumbersome and took up way less time. A serious mech designer never wanted to cut corners when he engaged in his primary work, but that could be quite troublesome at times.

If Ves wanted to experiment with his specialty or explore a new avenue without dedicating months of design time, then it might be a good idea for him to experiment with developing totems.

"What I'm doing right now is an opportunity to learn more about my specialty! I can try out new ideas, I can place my work in a different context and I can implement solutions I wouldn't dare to use on a mech design. As long as I don't take too much time away from mech design, it is quite worthwhile to devote my time to creating totems!"

As Ves continued to design the crown for his current client, he found that he enjoyed this process a lot. Unlike the previous times where he either developed excellent totems for himself or disposable totems for others, he began to think of himself as a true craftsman.

He had the illusion that he had become a venerated master artisan who received commissions from all kinds of powerful people. Even a dwarven emperor wished to receive his services!

"This could become a profitable side business for me." Ves murmured as his eyes shone brighter. "Not everyone is a mech pilot and not everyone needs a mech design from me. If I start to offer powerful and highly customized totems to wealthy individuals, I can earn a lot of money in the Red Ocean!"

Only the powerful and those attached to them had the qualifications to enter the Red Ocean at this early stage. Ves might not be able to compete adequately against all of the powerful Masters who had already set up shop in the new frontier, but he was pretty certain that no one could create artifacts like his upcoming crown!

Spending several uninterrupted hours on trying to rack his mind on how to best tailor the crown to an ambitious dwarven ruler caused him to think about his work from different angles.

A crown was not a mech and therefore had a different dynamic with its user.

Though Rion used to be a mech pilot in his past life, getting shot in the head before getting pieced back together by the MTA caused him to lose his ability to interface with mechs.

Therefore, Ves couldn't treat the intended user of his crown as an ordinary mech pilot. He had to configure his product in a way that made it powerful without relying on the strength of its wearer.

"Part of the reason why mechs are powerful is because they are a part of a greater whole." Ves reminded himself. The union between a mech and mech pilot produces one of the strongest combinations known to humanity."

This was why the Olympus Mons was so ridiculously strong in direct combat. Ves even guessed that Saint Mayorka and her ace mech could even beat up the Unending One in a direct battle!

Unlike his other clients, Ves could not impart that kind of power to Emperor Rion Aaden.

First, the resurrected dwarf was not a mech pilot anymore.

Second, a crown could not compare to a mech.

All of this meant that the crown he was trying to make would certainly pale in comparison to his mech.

If Ves was able to design a first-class mech under similar conditions, then whatever machine he would be able to make at the end could easily overpower any crown he made today!

There was nothing he could do about this disparity, but that didn't mean that Ves was resigned to make a weak product.

"Can a crown be as powerful as a mech? No, but I can leverage my advantages to close the gap as much as possible!"

As Ves set this goal in mind, he became more driven as he refined his crown design. He not only developed many new ideas, but also sublimated his thinking towards his own work.

"Whether I'm designing a mech or a totem, I should always maximize the value that I can provide to my customers!"

The premise of his design philosophy centered around maximizing the synergy between a mech and a mech pilot.

Ves believed he could generalize this relationship and do something similar with any product and any client.

Ves made a fairly obvious realization but one that he never explicitly thought about.

"Why should I limit myself to the properties of a mech? I don't need to rely on a neural interface to establish a bond between a mech and a mech pilot!"

Ves was quite confident that he could create a mechanism where Rion was able to 'interface' with his crown and thereby gain some control over it with his mind.

Of course, such a bond wouldn't be as good as the connection between a mech and a mech pilot, but it was better than nothing.

As long as Rion was able to bond with his crown, then he would be able to develop a friendship and a cooperative relationship with both the crown itself and the design spirit it hosted.

Ves briefly directed his eyes towards the brownish bone like material that he had set aside on a work table.

"With a prime material like Galenta Bone at my disposal, I can create a powerful living totem that is the equivalent of a prime mech!"

It didn't matter if Rion was the weak link of this three-way relationship. A weak mech pilot normally couldn't exert a lot of power when piloting a mech, but making the latter more powerful was a good way to compensate!

This was why Ves came up with an ambitious concept for his dwarven crown.

He wanted it to form a deep connection with Vulcan.

Initially, Ves wasn't that ambitious. At the beginning of this design session, he became profoundly affected by Rion's relationship with the Banner of Vulcan.

Although the banner initially started out as a weak artifact, it absorbed a lot of spiritual feedback from an innumerable amount of dwarves. Not only that, but Rion spent a lot of time bonding with it. This enabled the banner to provide powerful benefits such as miraculously restoring the memories that the dwarf had lost on his first death.

Ves could do a lot better this time. Why rely on growth to make the crown more powerful over time when he could invest a lot more resources at the start and make it powerful straight away?

Rion shouldn't have to wait half a century before his crown fully came online!

By leveraging the spiritual storage properties of Galenta Bone, Ves could infuse the crown with a lot of spiritual energy derived from Vulcan. This would turn the crown into a medium in which the dwarven design spirit could channel a lot of power and exert a lot of influence!

Rion likely wouldn't mind as his crown would gain a lot of power. Ves didn't mind either because Vulcan was effectively in control over the crown.

Anytime Rion wanted to channel a specific power, he essentially had to request Vulcan to make a move.

Also, since Vulcan was an incarnation, Ves would ultimately be in control of the crown!

Ves wondered if he could effectively influence Rion or whoever wore the crown by controlling it in secret. Even if it wasn't possible, he would still be able to extend his influence in a distant dwarven empire that was distinct from human society. This might be a great way for Ves to diversify and do business with people who usually weren't included in his customer base!

The only issue was that Ves needed to make sure that Rion didn't reject his crown design.

Though the old and wizened dwarven emperor was incredibly astute, Ves was confident that he could accomplish this much at least.

"I genuinely think this solution will provide the most value for Rion." He convinced himself.

Although the part about needing to rely on Vulcan sounded a little iffy, this was definitely a great way to empower a crown in the short term.

Ves didn't think that Rion had the patience to slowly grow and develop his imperial crown in the span of a couple of generations.

If the ambitious dwarf wanted to set up a prosperous dwarven star empire in his lifetime, then he needed to implement his masterplan quickly. He couldn't afford to lay low and build up his influence step by step, not when the Big Two continued to grow more powerful as well!

Therefore, Ves staked his entire crown design on what amounted to a devil's bargain.

Rion would gain the power he needed to unite the dwarven people. Ves subsequently gained influence over whoever wore and used the crown.

This was a win-win arrangement as long as Ves didn't abuse his access to the crown.

Ves had no intention of doing so as long as Rion wasn't malicious towards him. This was also one of his insurance policies. If Rion ever broke his promise and killed Ves after he obtained his crown, then Vulcan would certainly not be merciful!

"Saint Mayorka should be able to read my intentions, I think."

Although Ves wasn't exactly sure what ace pilots were capable of, they were all known for their incredible intuition and their ability to perceive threats and malicious intent.

Ves didn't dare to set any traps for that reason. He always set his mind to fulfilling the wishes of his client as honestly and as effectively as possible.

If the most effective solution just happened to come in the form of turning the crown into a direct of Vulcan, then that was fine as long as the design spirit wasn't hostile towards Rion!

"I'm sorry Rion, but you can't blame me for being weak. The only way I can grant you a lot of power is by borrowing it from an external source."

Slowly but surely, his design began to reach completion. Ves had spent a lot of time on expanding and refining its spiritual foundation so that it became a more excellent vehicle to channel Vulcan directly.

As a result, the crown would ultimately become a 'divine vessel' that allowed the dwarves to directly get in touch with Vulcan!

The basis of the dwarven emperor's power would subsequently be derived from his ability to invoke Vulcan and his powers!

#### *Chapter 3359: The Right to Rule*

When Ves finally completed his crown design, he had to present it to his client before he could proceed with fabricating it. After all, it would be too late for him to cry if Rion didn't like the end product!

"Oi! Rion!" He called to the armored dwarf looking down from above. "I finished my design for your crown! Come take a look. If there are any elements that you don't like, tell me and I'll try and fix it. That said, this is the best crown that I have envisioned for a dwarven sovereign such as yourself. Any suggestions you make will likely dilute its concept."

Someone as knowledgeable as Rion was likely aware of this dynamic, but it didn't hurt to remind him of how troublesome it was to implement significant changes to an existing design.



Rion went through a lot of trouble to commission a crown from 'Vulcan' instead of anyone else. It did not make sense to second-guess or challenge the judgement of the contractor.

Of course, a lot of people forgot about this point and demanded changes anyway.

If their requests were something as simple as changing a color or making minor cosmetic alterations, then creators such as Ves were more than happy to accommodate their client's wishes.

If the proposed changes negated hours of work put into designing important elements, then a contractor would definitely get pissed!

Right now, Ves hoped that the Iron Emperor wasn't too picky. A lot of time had already passed and the deadline was only 6 hours away.

When Rion descended from the catwalk and approached the workshop terminal, he quietly studied the projection design from every angle.

"I AM IMPRESSED WITH YOUR DESIGN RESULTS. NO OTHER DESIGN IS ABLE TO STIR MY EMOTIONS AS YOUR WORK."

Even though the imperial crown only existed in a virtual form at the moment, Ves had invested so much of himself into it that it had already come to life in a way.

It was no surprise that Rion would feel attracted to the crown. Ves had specifically designed it to complement the Iron Emperor in many different ways!

All of those years of working alongside Gloriana allowed him to pick up many different lessons on how to tailor a product to a specific individual.

Although Ves still wasn't as good as Gloriana when it came to customizing his work, he still possessed a substantial skill in this aspect compared to many other mech designers.

The dwarven leader began to frown as he beheld the bulk of his upcoming possession.

"YOUR PROPOSED DESIGN IS LARGER AND HEAVIER THAN I PREFER. THE CROWN MUST BE LARGE ENOUGH TO BE RECOGNIZABLE, BUT THAT DOES NOT MEAN THAT IT SHOULD LOOK OVERPOWERING WHEN I PLACE IT ON MY HEAD."

Ves anticipated this complaint. He had already thought of a suitable response.

"Don't tell me that your big head is too fragile to bear this crown. You're a dwarf. Your head is harder than that of other people. If you think your skull is too fragile, then just reinforce it with a metal sheath or something."

"YOU ARE DOING A POOR JOB IF THE ONLY WAY TO WEAR THIS CROWN IS TO AUGMENT MYSELF TO ENDURE ITS WEIGHT."

"On the contrary. I think I've done a great job!" Ves grinned. "My crown is meant to convey a lot of presence. It's not enough to rely on glows. It needs to possess a substantial amount of physical mass in order to turn it into a dwarven head ornament. Besides, the right to rule is meant to be a burden. You need to feel its weight on your head. You don't choose to wear the crown. The crown chooses you to be its bearer."

The strange words that Ves had issued caused Rion to sense a deeper message.

"TELL ME MORE ABOUT THIS CROWN."

"To me, the crown is more than a heavy piece of metal. It is a symbol of authority. In order to make it as unquestionable as possible, I have made it inseparable from Vulcan. The crown possesses a lot of unique abilities but only those who hold the divine right of kings are able to channel its power."

Silence stretched as Rion weighed the implications of this explanation. He was attracted by the prospect of gaining new abilities. The Banner of Vulcan that had become his personal partner already bestowed him with useful capabilities that had served him well as a ruler.

Yet he did not let his desires blind him to the potential risks and downsides of the crown.

"YOU HAVE TIED THE CROWN TO YOURSELF."

Ves smiled. He did not deny it. "Isn't that what you asked for? You wanted to borrow Vulcan's authority in order to gain legitimacy in front of dwarvenkind. This is exactly what the crown can do. It solves multiple problems. Not only will you be able to prove Vulcan's existence, you'll also be able to show that you hold the divine right of kings. Vulcan will directly validate your claim that you deserve to become the emperor of all dwarves."

Rion was clever enough to detect the loopholes in that arrangement. He could only pull off his masterplan if he retained Vulcan's approval.

There was no way that Ves remained uninvolved in all of this. If the mech designer wanted to spoil the emperor's plan, then he could easily change Vulcan's approval!

Although Ves preferably wanted to keep Rion in the dark about this possibility, it was too difficult to hide it. If the Iron Emperor hadn't sniffed it out, then Saint Mayorka would probably be able to discern the hidden intention behind this implementation.

What Ves needed to do was to provide a guarantee that Vulcan would not easily retract his approval.

"YOU NEED TO ALTER THIS RELATION." The Iron Emperor turned stony as he exuded a faint threat towards Ves.

It was too bad that Ves was confident in his own approach. He had gradually understood that Rion depended far too much on him to pull off his great plan. Without a suitable crown, there was no way he could gain the unflinching support of all of those powerful and stuck-up first-class dwarves!

"Relax, emperor. I have no reason to see you fail. Vulcan loves his subjects and always welcomes more worshippers. As far as I'm concerned, your gains will become his gains as well. With the Vulcan Empire about to fall, there is an urgent need to spread the Vulcan Faith to other groups of dwarves. The crown can facilitate this process in the most effective way. As long as you channel its complete might while you make your case, I can guarantee you that all of those wealthy and powerful dwarves will back your ambitious plan."

The crown spoke to dwarves. That was undeniable. Even Rion could feel it when he looked at the design. Its large and blocky design along with its intimate connection to Vulcan caused it to attract the attention of dwarves in a more forceful and imperious way than the Banner of Vulcan.

The banner was a tool meant to inspire dwarves to fight against their adversaries. However, its shortcoming was that it did not convey enough authority.

If Rion was able to prove his right to rule with the help of the Banner of Vulcan, he wouldn't have waited so long to commission a crown!

Now that his goal was within reach, it was unlikely that he would want to spoil Ves' work despite the mismatch in expectations.

Just like how Rion had put Ves into a trap, Ves had also managed to get back at his client.

Time passed by as the Iron Emperor quietly considered the proposed design. Ves was sure that he was soundlessly communicating with Saint Mayorka, because her domain field briefly swept across the workshop.

Ves had already expected this to happen. There was no way Rion wouldn't want his pet ace pilot to search for potential danger.

Fortunately, Ves already possessed a good understanding of what high-ranking mech pilots were capable of. Even if the exact capabilities of ace pilots still eluded him, he could still make a lot of educated guesses by extrapolating the capabilities of expert pilots.

He knew that if he wanted to convince his client to accept this design, Ves had to be absolutely sincere about helping Rion achieve his goal!

The fact that this happened to make Rion dependent on Ves' cooperation was a happy bonus. With this dynamic in mind, the chances that the dwarves would break their word and kill the Larkinsons was practically nil!

"YOU ARE PLAYING A DANGEROUS GAME HERE, VULCAN."

"Becoming an emperor is not enough to command the allegiance of your kind." Ves boldly stated. "Only by obtaining the backing of a god will you be able to stand out from the wannabes and pretenders. I bet you're not the first courageous dwarf who thought about separating dwarvenkind from humankind. What makes you different is that your divine right of kings is authentic. All of those dwarves you're hoping to persuade had never encountered anything like it. They are bound to place their hopes on you if you manage to make good use of the crown."

In the end, the allure of obtaining a crown that would have the strongest possible effect on the dwarves won out. Rion could not afford to spoil this arrangement just because he was held back by his concerns.

He already understood that Ves was being sincere in his own crooked way. Vulcan was the God of Dwarves and would never say no to gaining more worshippers.

"I SHALL ALLOW YOU TO MAKE THIS CROWN." Rion eventually decided.  
"HOWEVER, I SHALL BE THE ONE WHO WILL JUDGE WHETHER THE CROWN FITS MY PURPOSE. NO MATTER WHAT YOU CLAIM OR BOAST ABOUT YOUR WORK, I REFUSE TO WEAR A CROWN THAT IS INLAID WITH THORNS."

"You don't need to worry about that. The thorns on this crown only face outward." Ves chuckled. "The whole theme of this crown revolves around the right to rule. It is literally made for someone like you, so there is no reason for you to fear my work. The same cannot be said for other people. Some of the abilities of the crown allow you to discern the loyalty of nearby dwarves and protect you against those who wish you ill. It is a powerful tool that is explicitly designed for you to lead and manage a group of dwarves."

"I AM AN EMPEROR. I DO NOT REQUIRE THESE FUNCTIONS." Rion frowned.  
"MAKING USE OF THESE ABILITIES WILL MAKE ME DEPENDENT ON THEM. I DO NOT APPROVE OF SUCH A DEVELOPMENT."

Ves shrugged. "How you use your crown is your business. I'm simply presenting the whole package. It is up to you whether you want to use or neglect its capabilities. I think someone as disciplined as you should have no problem reining in your temptation. Perhaps some of the tricks I've mentioned will come in real handy when you are having difficulties with persuading a particularly stubborn group of dwarves. Your people can be quite intractable sometimes."

"THAT IS TRUE."

In the end, Rion did not put up any further objections. A part of him was deeply attracted to all of the powers that Ves had described. Even if he had to depend on Vulcan to activate most of them, leveraging the crown still allowed him to employ solutions that he previously couldn't make use of! If he wanted to found a dwarven empire within half a century, then he needed to move quickly and avoid alarming the Big Two.

"I TRUST IN YOUR PROFESSIONALISM." Rion looked directly at Ves. "AS LONG AS YOU TURN IT INTO A MASTERWORK, I WILL WRITE OFF ALL OF MY DEBTS AND GRIEVANCES TO YOU. THAT IS WHAT I HAVE PROMISED."

"Sounds great." Ves replied. "If you don't mind, could you give me some of those juicy first-class materials if I succeed? I'll work extra hard if there is a bonus on the line."

"GET TO WORK, VULCAN!"

*Chapter 3360: Characteristic Work*

The Iron Emperor was too stingy. He refused to issue a bonus if Ves managed to make a masterwork crown.

Oh well. Ves tried at least. Though he was incredibly greedy for precious materials like Galenta Bone and Pieraester, Rion must have paid a fortune to amass all these expensive first-class materials.

As far as the dwarf was concerned, letting Ves go after all he had done was enough of a reward!

This outcome reflected the ambivalent relationship between Ves and Rion.

The two weren't friends, but they weren't enemies either.

Rion had lots of good reasons to take revenge on Ves. Though the dwarf currently maintained the upper hand in this situation, the awkward truth was that he still had to depend on his 'god' to realize his ambitions.

This was why the dwarf was fine with allowing the Olympus Mons to kill a couple of humans and destroy a small amount of mechs and ships. No matter how much he suppressed his emotions, he still didn't hold any good feelings towards Ves.

As for Ves, his main goal had always been to get out of this situation alive.

In fact, if he obeyed Rion's requirements to the letter, he could have designed a more conservative crown that delivered what the dwarven leader had asked for and nothing more.

That was the safest option, but it was also a mistake as far as Ves was concerned.

The demand to make a masterwork crown was a heavy one. Ves could never take it lightly. Even if he had used Vulcan's powers to make a masterwork mech figurine, that was mostly because it was based on his successful Valkyrie Redeemer design and because he was still exploring his incarnation's capabilities.

The key to making a masterwork was to be passionate about his work. He needed to care for it and commit his feelings to it in order to make it special.

In the Battle of Fordilla Zentra, Ves learned that masterworks functioned as an extension of their creator.

That was how Ketis managed to transfer Sharpie to the Decapitator and use that interaction to intervene in a mech battle. It was also how Ves managed to do something similar to the Amaranto and empower Venerable Stark's attack.

One of the implications of this key insight was that masterworks needed to reflect the strengths and desires of their creators.

For example, the Devil Tiger was a strong reflection of what Ves was truly like as a mech designer. He was an innovator who constantly wanted to create powerful new solutions and eagerly took risks in order to make a lot of progress.

As Ves turned his Devil Tiger Project into a passion project, he became completely consumed by the desire to make a unique new mech based on new and unprecedented growth concepts.

The fact that it ended up as a masterwork was a validation of his extreme approach!

The Amaranto was another example of how inventing something different and trying out experimental new ideas yielded rewards to Ves. His persistent desire to improve his luminar crystals so that he could equip his first ranged expert mech with a powerful weapon system had driven him to push his work beyond its limits!

Ves guessed that the same effect was also the reason why Gloriana managed to make the Little Angel.

The Blessed Squire was their first hexer mech design that was technically intricate and provided a lot of space for Gloriana to indulge in her need to fit all of the puzzle pieces together in the right way.

He had already suspected that this kind of hidden rule was in effect for masterwork products, but the revelation he gained from seeing Ketis in action provided him with solid proof!

In short, if he wanted to make a masterwork out of this crown, he needed to go bold and implement solutions he hadn't thought of before!

The first-class luminar crystals, the use of a brand-new prime material, the high integration with Vulcan, the realization of the divine right of kings and more were all aspects that caused this project to stand out from his other totem projects!

In its current form, the crown design was as ambitious as Ves could get away with. He had high hopes for his product and was incredibly eager to translate it into reality!

As someone who was familiar with craftsmanship, Rion was able to detect his captive's enthusiasm. Ves did not hide his passion. In fact, he deliberately exposed it to the dwarves in order to convey his sincerity for his design!

The unspoken message behind Ves' insistence on sticking to the current design was that any changes would ruin his passion. Once his mood worsened, the odds of creating a masterwork crown was much reduced!

Rion couldn't afford to take the chance of ruining what might be his only chance to obtain the crown he truly needed. Even if a couple of details looked off, as long as it did the job, who cared about the details?

As a result, the Iron Emperor finally gave his assent to proceed with fabricating the crown. The heavily-armored dwarf retreated to the upper catwalk in order to give 'Vulcan' enough space to perform his craft.

Ves grinned as he prepared all of the resources and tools for his upcoming fabrication attempt.

Since so much was at stake for him, he couldn't afford to be careless. He not only needed to become familiar with the production equipment he was about to work with, he also needed to understand the precise properties of the first-class materials that he selected.



As he proceeded to do his preparations, he felt free enough to ask one persistent question that had been nagging at the back of his mind.

"Why are you in such a hurry, Rion?" He asked. "You've waited at least a decade for me to arrive at this asteroid belt. Why do you insist on giving me just 24 hours for me to make your crown? Are you trying to put more pressure on me? You know that I can still fail, you know."

"THE GALAXY DOES NOT REVOLVE AROUND YOU, VULCAN." Rion crossed his armored arms. "I CANNOT REMAIN HERE NOW THAT I HAVE EXPOSED MY TRACE. DESPITE WHAT YOU THINK, THE EMPIRE OF THE LOST AND ALL OF THE NEARBY HUMAN STATES ARE AWARE OF MY EXISTENCE. I AM A HIGH-PRIORITY TARGET TO THEM. AS LONG AS THEY CAN CAPTURE ME, THEY CAN LEVERAGE MY IDENTITY TO FORCE MORE VULCANITES TO SURRENDER WITHOUT PUTTING UP A RESISTANCE."

"Ah."

That made sense. Ves was briefly surprised that the neighboring humans knew that the hero of the dwarven rebellion was alive, but no secret could be hidden forever. With how much money Rion had siphoned from his state in order to fund his extravagant acquisition, it should be easy enough for spies to discover that something was amiss!

"ALSO, I HAVE ONLY AMASSED A LIMITED QUANTITY OF EACH FIRST-CLASS EXOTIC AND ALLOY. CAN YOU CREATE A SECOND CROWN BASED ON THE EXACT SAME DESIGN?"

"Uhm, no." Ves blinked as he swept his gaze over the materials he chose. "If I fail to make what you want, it is unlikely that I can recycle all of the materials that I have used. You don't have enough reserves for me to create a second crown."

"EXACTLY." Rion contemptuously smiled. "I AM A DECISIVE EMPEROR, VULCAN. I CAN RECOGNIZE REALITY AND KNOW WHEN IT IS TIME TO CUT MY LOSSES. DESPITE MY INVESTMENT IN THIS CROWN, I WILL NOT TAKE EXCESSIVE RISKS AND CHASE AFTER A LOSING PROPOSITION ONCE IT HAS BECOME CLEAR IT WILL NOT YIELD THE DESIRED RESULTS."

Of course, Rion wouldn't treat Ves nicely if he didn't get what he wanted. His threat was still valid!

Half an hour passed before Ves finished his preparations. He had rapidly mastered the controls and operations of the various devices and he had also familiarized himself with the exact properties of all of the samples.

"I will start now." He said. "Wish me luck."

Before Rion could say anything pompous, Ves went to work.

The first action he performed was to draw out the Hammer of Vulcan and knock it against his head!

Bonk!

The brief contact caused Vulcan to put Ves into a false inspired state, causing him to view his crown design in a new light. Already, he began to develop better ideas about some of his solutions.

Now that he was close to his best state, he eagerly began to take the first step.

He began with the luminar crystals as synthesizing them was fairly delicate work. Ves believed it was best to produce them while he was still fresh.

Although he had already created a viable first-class luminar crystal before, that was when he created a smaller sample.

The twelve jewels that were supposed to be embedded into the upper section of the crown came in a larger size. Eleven of them would adorn the sides while a larger one would be affixed on the blocky front.

Ves already possessed a decent understanding of luminar crystal tech and he did not hesitate to channel the Illustrious One to ensure the crystals were as high in quality as he could make them under the circumstances.

"I still don't know enough about first-class luminar crystals, but these will do I guess."

Eventually, he ended up with twelve crystals that closely matched his specifications. He was a bit disappointed that none of them hit the ceiling but that was not necessarily an indicator that he would fail in making a masterwork crown.

He soon proceeded with fabricating the base of the crown. This was the section that would make direct contact with the skull or helmet of the Iron Emperor and therefore had to be solid as well as ergonomic.

Ves had already received precise measurements and scans of Rion's bald head, so he was not worried about botching the fit of his work.

"This Galenta Bone is really difficult to manipulate!" Ves gritted his teeth. "It's so hard to turn it into a consistent and uniform shape!"

Bone was an inconsistent material by nature. The center might be denser than the edges. The left side might be more porous while the right side was laced with impurities. These reasons and more all made it incredibly challenging to work with such a material.

Fortunately, humans developed solutions for nearly every problem. With the right tools, even Galenta Bone straightened out to a large extent.

Once Ves managed to complete a suitable base, he began to create the upper side of the crowns. The various blocky protrusions had to be made from a combination of Galenta Bone, Piraester, EFV-343 and Extreme Cold Titanium.

He also included minor amounts of other materials in order to prevent powerful exotic materials such as EFV-343 and Extreme Cold Titanium from going out of control.

This was one of the more time-consuming portions of this job. Ves had to slow down and work precisely in order to make sure that every tiny part fit into place without any complications.

As the hours began to pass, the false inspired state that Vulcan had initially imparted on Ves had already begun to fade.

Though Ves no longer enjoyed a powerful blessing, he had still obtained a lot of gains from the temporary state. He had spontaneously tweaked and altered minor aspects of his crown in order to make it more effective.

Once he neared the end of the fabrication attempt, he began to channel Vulcan more and more as he affixed the luminar crystals into their sockets.

During this time, Ves also enabled Vulcan to slowly infuse the Galenta Bone component of the crown with spiritual energy.

The crown became increasingly more powerful and holy as he did so. Vulcan inputted roughly 10 Ves worth of spiritual energy into the work, which wasn't powerful enough to make it intolerable to wear the crown, but still significant enough to turn it into a prime totem.

Ves finally released all of his tension as he carved a small third eye on the surface of the crown.

"It's done."

The outcome was already within his expectations. With how much he invested into its design and how much help Vulcan provided during this fabrication attempt, creating a masterwork was already a certain reward!

Ves eagerly observed his latest work as it began to transform in a mysterious fashion.

It was a crown truly fit for an emperor!