

## The Mech Touch

### Chapter 4691: Old Wine in a new Bottle

Ves and his family interviewed a bunch of other clients in the following two hours.

The flagship store manager thoughtfully selected clients that represented a broad base of customers of the LMC.

From the owner of a competitive mech team to a mid-level procurement agent of a large mercenary organization, each of them explained their own reasoning why they favored LMC mechs over the products sold by rival companies.

"As a fellow alien hunter, you should already know that raiding alien ships and settlements can be extremely lucrative." A pioneer who ran a formidable expeditionary fleet said. "While we do our best to do our research and scout our targets before we attack, there are times when those stinking aliens bring out strange and unexpected phasewater tech that causes a lot of damage to us. Subduing them quickly is our highest priority, and we found that some of the glows of your mechs makes it much easier for us to do so. Ever since we started to field Ferocious Piranhas, Doom Guards and Pacifiers in our mech force, we have been able to neutralize our alien opposition much faster, saving us a lot of damage and more than a couple of lives."

The suppressive glows of those three mech models played a large role in why they had become enduring bestsellers. While it was a pity that the Pacifier mech line was a joint mech design where the Larkinson Clan had to split its profits with the Voiken Family, the latter also bore much of the burden of production, thereby causing the famed law enforcement mech to become a lot more ubiquitous in the zones where it was sold!

"Are those three mech models the only LMC products that you have added to the mech roster of your expeditionary fleet?"

The pioneer nodded. "That is correct, Patriarch Larkinson. No offense, but we are professionals. We don't need to make use of cheap tricks to pepper up our mech pilots. There is little point in adding mechs such as the Desolate Soldier, the Crystal Lord or the Aurora Titan. The only other possible LMC mech we are considering to add to our ranks is the Buzzy Bee. That is also the reason why I visited this store today. I wanted to see for myself whether your ECM and communication mech can truly talk to each other through heavy interference."

"I believe that you will not be disappointed with the communication strength of my Buzzy Bee line." Ves smiled as he did not neglect this opportunity to market one of his products. "What is your favorite mech?"

"It would definitely have to be the Doom Guard." The other man wickedly grinned. "It is just so satisfying to hear the odd and exotic aliens scream as my Doom Guards break into their cities and burn them all to a crisp with their powerful flamethrowers. The name of this mech model is truly appropriate. While my men often go overboard and cause way more collateral damage than necessary, there is no better way to short circuit these stupid aliens than to engulf them with fire and a glow that can paralyze their minds depending on their species."

That... was not what Ves had in mind when he designed the original third-class iteration of the Doom Guard a long time ago, but oh well. At least his old mech concept still found a way to remain useful by recontextualizing its advantages in a different environment.

"Be sure to recommend my Doom Guards to your friends and allies." Ves spoke after the interview with the pioneer came to an end.

"I will! There are more than enough aliens in the galaxy that are still waiting to get burned to a crisp. It's a lot easier to chase them down and cleanse them with fire if they become insensitive and too mentally tormented to put up any decent resistance. You should really consider expanding the range of mechs that carry this terrific glow. I would definitely want to buy hundreds of knight mechs, spearman mechs, lancer mechs and most definitely a stealth mech if your company is able to develop one for sale."

Marvaine became a lot more excited when he imagined what those mechs could do. Combining the glow of the Doom Guard and the Ferocious Piranha with a stealth mech sounded like a fearsome combination! The amount of terror and disruption it could cause while remaining under active stealth was enormous!

The little boy patted his tiny palms onto Lucky's plated back, causing the cat to make a soft sound of enjoyment.

"You should design those mechs, papa! This glow is so useful that it is good with any melee mech. You can build an entire collection of mechs that can disorient their enemies!"

"We have other priorities, my son. Applying the same glow to all kinds of mechs without any other reason except that we can isn't enough to justify their creation. Only a few more combinations make sense. I think pairing up this glow with a knight mech and possibly a stealth mech should be the limit. Any mech force can then employ this mech by mixing and matching models that include one of the four LMC mechs that possess this glow."

"If we publish too many mech designs with this glow, we will also encourage our competitors and enemies, both human and alien, to invest more resources into countering their defining characteristics." Gloriana told Marvaine. "We can't make our company too dependent on a single collection of mech designs. If their sole gimmick loses their value, a lot of customers will get stuck with LMC mechs that are plainly not as good as the alternatives sold by other mech companies."

In fact, most customers already made do with the Ferocious Piranha for offensive actions and the Doom Guard for defensive stands.

A knight mech with a disorienting glow was handy in situations where a true melee mech that could resist a lot more attacks needed to be used.

A stealth mech with the same glow provided an incredible amount of utility and flexibility under the right circumstances. It could be considered a weakened and much more watered down version of his upcoming Ghost Project as both operated on similar logic.

As Ves interviewed a bunch of other fans of the LMC, he became increasingly more interested in what demands they had that his mech company had yet to meet.

Though he heard many of the same requests, the diverse customers occasionally came up with oddball requests.

"We could use a nanny mech. Ah, by that I mean a dedicated support mech. Don't get me wrong. It is useful to have a lot of combat mechs, but the way we operate is reminiscent of how a balanced military mech regiment is run. We don't want our combat mechs to be forced into performing support duties that they are not good at in the first place. If you can make a new mech that can provide area energy shielding, rescue trapped mech pilots from their stuck cockpits and launch utility missiles."

"We'll think about it." Ves said in a vague tone.

He had been thinking about designing a dedicated support mech for both his clan and the market ever since Master Vayro Goldstein showed off his flower-shaped first-class support-oriented mech.

Another customer wanted to acquire more mechs with powerful energy weapons.

"Of all of the ranged mechs we have tried, your machines satisfy us the most. No one else can equip their mechs with anything comparable to luminar crystal weapons. They are slightly smaller, lighter, more efficient and produce less heat. We don't like how they are difficult to repair or how we can't really modify them in any substantial way, but they are fantastic when employed in large numbers. We would love it if you can sell light mechs, marksman mechs, cannoner mechs armed with luminar crystal weapons. I think you would make a killing!"

"Your wish may come true one day, but luminar crystal weapons are specialty products that are a bit expensive and troublesome to produce due to their alien nature."

A local security company from Davute were big fans of the Pacifier model and wanted more mechs that complement its features.

"Our Pacifiers are fairly fast, light and affordable, but that is not always what we need. We perform many guard missions, and in order to do this job well, we need massive and intimidating defensive mechs that can carry thick riot shields and contain enough modular capacity to mount other optional gear."

"Interesting suggestion." Ves replied. "I am open to do so, but we will need to gain the cooperation of Voiken Industries, our partner that we collaborated with on the Pacifier mech line. Right now, Voiken is more interested in expanding the market for its own mech ecosystem, so we will have to enter into difficult negotiations if we want to release a big brother to the Pacifier."

In the end, Ves gained a much better idea of what the existing customers wanted from the LMC.

They wanted more mech models and a more varied selection of mech types. They did not mind whether the new products largely copied the winning formulas of older LMC products.

"I think the market demand is clear." Gloriana said at the end of the interview session. "People want more of the same."

Ves shook his head. "Not exactly. Our existing customers want more of the same. These are the folks that our mech company has already captured with our existing products. Making more of the same may attract new customers who did not consider us before, but what this approach will mainly do is allow us to earn money from the same customer base."

"You speak as if this is a bad development. A good company should always seek to satisfy its core supporters first. You can focus on attracting new customers after you have exhausted your old clients."

Ves was not too sure about that. He preferred to focus most if not all of his time on designing new and original mech concepts as opposed to putting old wine in new bottles.

Still, he could see the merits of this approach.

"We can pursue this strategy if we are able to double the number of Journeymen in the Design Department." He eventually said.

"How much progress have you made on that, Ves? You told me that you wanted to take care of it yourself. Have your recruiters collected any worthwhile applications from interested Journeymen?"

"Our clan is constantly receiving applications from random Journeymen every day. There are a number of decent mech designers among them, but they are not good enough in my eyes."

Gloriana frowned. "Then how will you solve our shortage?"

"By doing exactly what worked before." Ves grinned. "I managed to recruit four fairly young, ambitious and promising Journeymen after competing against them in a mech design tournament back when we were staying in the Vulit Central Star Node. It just so happens that Davute is planning to hold a huge festival to celebrate the founding of its colonial state. The festival won't last long, so I can only sign up for one or two mech design contests, but that should be enough to showcase my improved design prowess and impress my fellow contestants."

"That... can work." Gloriana admitted. "You should tell Ketis and some of the other Journeymen to sign up to the tournaments as well as long as they meet our standards."

"I have already notified them of this suggestion."

Sara Voiken, Dulo Voiken, Janassa Pellier and Tifi Coslone already participated in numerous mech design contests in the past, so they should have no problem with attaining at least a decent result.

Ketis would doubtlessly steal the show if she signed up for a mech design contest that centered around melee landbound mechs. Ves wasn't confident that she could achieve a good result under other conditions, though.

The remaining three Journeymen of the Design Department would probably embarrass themselves and ruin the reputation of the Larkinson Clan if they attempted to compete.

Miles Tovar and Merrill O'Brian lacked the depth of knowledge and the experience to perform well in high-pressure, time-limited events.

Cormaunt Hempkamp might score better in these areas, but his neural interface specialty provided him with a fairly limited advantage by itself.

Of course, Ves never even considered Gloriana in the first place. He already understood her objections to taking part in design competitions and she would rather sell her expensive collection of handbags than be forced to design a working mech in a matter of days!

## Chapter 4692: Tax Exemption

By the time that Ves was ready to end his stay at the LMC's flagship store in the Commercial District, he was more than satisfied with the gains he made.

While it was easy for him to browse the galactic net for opinions and reviews on his commercial products, interviewing his customers in person was much more insightful and closer to reality.

Ves knew that once he completed his latest batch of projects, he should spend more time on rounding out the LMC's mech catalog even further.

Although his Design Department also needed to spend a lot of time on revising its existing second-class mechs into quasi-first-class mechs, he and his colleagues should be able to do both at the same time as long as he hired an additional batch of mech designers.

Both he and his wife shared knowing glances. The Living Mech Corporation was still the main foundation of their clan. Although their recent expeditions provided them with much more profit, these gains were incidental and far too volatile to rely on, especially in the long term.

Before they left, their children briefly visited the gift section of the store and eagerly browsed all of the mech figurines, dolls and plushies on sale.

"Wow, this cat plushie is so soft and furry."

"These mech figures suck. They're not alive and they don't have any glows. The ones that papa makes are much better!"

"Look, look! That's you, papa! There's a doll that looks exactly like you! It's so cute!"

"Wait, what?!"

All three children converged in front of a display stand that sold semi-realistic looking figurines that were modeled after every heroic figure in the Larkinson Clan.

Most of them were based on the expert pilots of the clan. They were the most prominent mech pilots among the Larkinsons and each of them performed dazzlingly in much of the battle footage that got posted on the galactic net.

However, aside from these obvious heroes that many people aspired to become, the display stand also featured figurines based on two different mech designers, namely Ves and Ketis!

Ves was the head of the Larkinson Clan and he looked suitably dashing and larger than life in his Unending Regalia.

Ves could see that the materials used to make this figurine came quite close in matching the look and feel of Unending alloy. Once he picked up one of the toys modeled after himself, he became satisfied with its heft.

"At least they did a good job at conveying the density of my armor. It's a shame they opted to make these figurines look a bit cartoonish."

The realism was fairly good but not to the point of being able to pass as an actual version of himself.

"Why doesn't the store sell a figurine based on myself? Ves! You need to call the Marketing Department right away and tell those idiots over there to correct this injustice!"

"Not now, honey."

If the toy based on Ves already looked impressive, then the one based on Ketis was much more exciting!

Andraste had already tossed the Ves toy aside and grabbed the one based on Ketis.

The swordmaster looked like a noble techno-barbarian in her own combat armor. No one would be able to imagine that she was a mech designer when she was armed and ready to chop up aliens with her Bloodsigner greatsword!

"It can even fight!"

Andraste pressed a hidden button and activated a few commands before setting it down on a surface.

She then picked up the doll based on Venerable Dise and did the same.

Just like the Ketis figurine, the toy based on Venerable Dise did not depict her in a piloting suit. Instead, the expert pilot wore a custom suit of armor Swordmaiden combat armor and wielded a greatsword of her own!

The toys began to speak their lines as soon as they activated.

[My Bloodsinger yearns to amputate your arms!]

[I am the ultimate hunter of exobeasts!]

Tiny projectors and other devices caused the toys to glow as if they were cartoon heroes. Their swords looked especially flashy as they glowed with the illusion of power.

The toys soon began to fight and spar against each other!

Although their moves weren't as sophisticated as that of real Swordmaidens, the fighting skills and acumen demonstrated by the AIs controlling the figurines were surprisingly accurate and realistic!

"Dise is going to win." Marvaine said. "She's older and has more combat experience."

Andraste objected to that and slammed her hand on the top of his head. "NO! My teacher is a true swordmaster! She's a much better fighter than Dise! I've seen them spar before!"

While this was going on, Ves looked on with a bemused and befuddled expression. He did not know what he should feel about the fact that his own stores sold toys based on himself and other Larkinson personalities.

He understood the logic behind it, but he did not really feel that this was appropriate. What the hell were the product designers thinking when they tried to make an action figure of their own patriarch!?

"Alright, that's enough, kids. We are on a schedule. We need to get back to our shuttle and head over to the next stop."

"The fight isn't over yet! Ketis is just about to beat Dise!"

"Papa, I want this and this and this and this! Oh this too!"

"Mama, please tell papa to give us these toys!"

"Miaow!"

Once Ves finally gave in and bought a couple of toys for them, he and his family headed back to the roof where they boarded their armored shuttle.

Their next destination was not too far away as it was located in the same district, so the vehicle soon touched down on a different landing pad.

The room was a little larger and broader than the previous one. This had to do with the architecture of the structure.

Unlike with the flagship store, Ves had a lot of mixed feelings about visiting this location. However, the reports he received as of late informed him that its popularity had skyrocketed as of late.



So many more people flocked to its halls and asked for guidance that the clansmen who staffed it were beginning to feel overwhelmed. New problems emerged that required more impactful decisions on how to proceed forward.

This was why Ves wanted to pay a personal visit here. He could not only take in the changes that took place recently, but also make decisions on the spot.

"I love cats~" Aurelia sang as she held her cat plushie.

"Swordmaidens are the best!" Andraste exclaimed as she struggled to hold the figurines of Ketis and Dise in her hands.

"Miaow."

Clixie followed after the kids while holding a figurine of Ves between her teeth. Due to its size, the cat had to bite Ves in the head in order to carry him around.

In the meantime, Ves had already walked forward and greeted a familiar woman in robes.

"Welcome to the Enlightened Church of Vulcan, sir. It is an honor for you and your divine children to grace our halls." Samantha Avikon greeted with utmost respect and devotion.

"Ahem!" Ves coughed as if he just sneezed. "This is not a church. It is the headquarters of the Davute Branch of the Creation Association. I do not recall it ever being named a church."

"That is where you are wrong, sir. Let me explain while we step inside."

The tale she told sounded simple. As the properties in the core districts of Kotor City drastically rose in value, the local government recognized the enormous potential to harvest a lot of revenue.

The government therefore raised its taxes and fees on the business activities conducted in this hot region, and the Commercial District suffered the most as a consequence.

It wasn't enough to drive out most of the companies who set up shop here, as the large number of customers with high spending power more than made up for the extra costs.

That said, no one looked forward to paying drastically more taxes, especially to a government that they mostly felt no attachment to. Davute was so young and new that not a single adult businessman had grown up in the colony.

"Many establishments in the Commercial District tried to study the colonial laws that the founders of Davute had set in order to find a loophole they could exploit."

Gloriana snorted. "The Davute Alliance is thorough in these matters. An army of lawyers, economists and other relevant experts are working for the government. There shouldn't be a way to avoid paying higher taxes."

"Ah, but that is not quite correct." The director of the Creation Association smiled at her. "Davute operates under laws that are derived from a standard code that is extremely mature and perfected over several thousand years. Many of the regulations concerning taxes and fees apply to for-profit companies. Non-profits fall under a different arrangement, among which churches and religious organizations enjoy the greatest exemptions and reductions. Since it is our duty to ensure we minimize our expenditures as much as possible, we tried to apply to reclassify this headquarters as a church."

"And it worked?" Ves asked as if he couldn't believe that this actually happened.

"Yes. The city administrator visited us and toured our fine halls for two hours before he personally approved of our request. The status of our organization changed the next day, allowing us to keep almost all of our revenue provided our profits do not exceed a certain threshold. We have no problem with that as we can reinvest much of what we earn into renovating and upgrading this church as well as construct new churches in different star systems."

"What."

This was way too easy! If any organization could claim to be a church that was not aiming to make a profit, then half of the stores in the Commercial District would turn into halls of worship the next day!

When the group finally descended to the ground floor and stepped inside the main hall of the enormous structure, they all became astounded by the sight.

Compared to the time when Ves last visited the headquarters of the Creation Association, it became clear that almost everything had been transformed!

Gone was the clean interior with gunmetal gray walls. Gone were the diverse and random works of craftsmanship that numerous master craftsmen had donated to the Creation Association. Gone were the rooms and floors that made this place feel like an actual trade association that was centered around different crafts.

Instead, whoever planned this renovation decided to knock down a lot of walls and remove entire floors to create an enormous hall with an exaggeratingly high ceiling!

The interior had been remodeled to accommodate bronze-like metal walls and floors that had been deliberately antiqued to convey a greater sense of age and solemnity.

The interior also gained a lot more complexity by shaping it with a combination of gothic and fantastical elements that made this hall look like a set out of a fantasy drama!

If that wasn't enough, the interior designers also amped up the religious vibe by borrowing a page out of the Vulcan Faith that once dominated a defunct dwarven state!

Murals, statues and ornaments centered around hammers, craftsmanship and most importantly Vulcan was everywhere!

"You could have at least used the human version of Vulcan." Ves grumbled.

Pretty much every depiction of the God of Dwarves, Mechs and Craftsmanship was a bearded dwarf who liked to hold a hammer!

Although Ves felt repulsed by all of these radical architectural changes, he had to admit that it succeeded in making an unforgettable impression to those who stepped into the cathedral-like hall for the first time.

He was most impressed by the interplay between light and shadow.

Curiously enough, much of the lightning in the hall was muted. The stained windows that depicted Vulcan engaged in different acts of crafting were not that large and did not illuminate much.

Projected candles that radiated soft light prevented the hall from descending into complete darkness, but the weight of shadows was still heavy.

This made the pockets of light that much more precious and dramatic!

Specific holes in the walls and ceiling shone much brighter and more concentrated light, allowing specific areas to look blessed and radiant.

From the enormous statue of Vulcan that was prominently placed in front of the pews to the hammer symbols that represented the forces of creation and destruction, each of them gained an enormous air of reverence.

The sights were enough to compel many visitors who had signed up to become members of the Creation Association to pray and prostrate before these religious symbols!

"Hmph! I told my friends that papa was a god." Aurelia arrogantly stated.

Ves wanted to palm his face. "I am not a god! Don't believe in the lies that others tell you! I am just a human!"

"Wow... you're so short." Marvaine said as he tugged Ves' hand. "Did you change your body so that you grew taller?"

"I am not a dwarf, Marvaine! In fact, Vulcan isn't supposed to be a dwarf either. Only a certain sub-section of dwarves believe that he is part of their own kind. He's traditionally a human, especially in the ancient myths!"

"Where is the Superior Mother? Where is Helena? More importantly, where are my statues? This church is not complete without its women!"

## **- Chapter 4693: Filling the Void |**

### **Chapter 4693: Filling the Void**

"Hihihi!"

"Wow, look at how pretty this looks."

"Look! There's a large version of you, Lucky! I think this is what you will look like if you grow into a tiger. You would look so ferocious!"

"Meow..."

The children loved the place. They did not let the darkness deter them from running around and exploring the sights.

"Quiet down, children!" Gloriana tried to admonish the kids. "This is a sacred place of worship. Even if you don't want to respect your father, you should at least respect the piety of its guests!"

That was the thing about this 'church'. The main hall of the headquarters of the Creation Association currently holds over a hundred different visitors!

Much to Ves' relief, the visitors did not wear robes or acted anything close to radical Ylvainans, Hexers, Vulcanites or any of the other crazy extremist believers that he had encountered in his journeys.

Most of them wore clean business suits or workwear that looked as if they were right at home in a workshop.

"Even before we have renovated this structure into a church, we have already begun to attract admirers of one of your divine personas." Director Samandra spoke to Ves. "Back then, they would sit in front of the totems you have made for us. They prayed for many reasons. Some wanted your blessing to help them succeed in their next crafting projects. Others wanted to get accepted as an apprentice to a famed maker. Many of the older and more experienced artisans came in order to gain inspiration."

Ves felt worse and worse as he said heard this. Though he understood that Vulcan needed a lot of spiritual feedback in order to grow and evolve, he did not want to turn his incarnation into a literal god!

"You know that I explicitly set up the Creation Association as a non-religious organization, right?"

"I do not think so." The former priestess from the Life Research Association retorted. "You wouldn't have put me in charge if that was the case. Deep down, you recognized that this path was inevitable. You are a god, Ves. If not now, then in the future. What we are doing for you is helpful to you. We know that because Vulcan's glow has been growing stronger and more defined with each passing week. I know because I pray to you multiple times every day myself."

Ves let out a frustrated grunt. "I did not ask for your prayers."

The woman smiled at this response. "Yet you, or rather Vulcan, accept my prayers with . You even answer back to me at times. This allows me to know that I am doing god's will."

"That isn't me! That must have come from the spiritual dwarf essence that I stuffed into his creation!" Ves complained!

Vulcan may be another version of himself, but he also developed more autonomy due to the fact that he was an external incarnation.

Ves let Vulcan do his own thing most of the time as it was too exhausting and distracting to micromanage another life form, especially one that transcended the limits of lower order life.

The disconnect that resulted from that caused Ves to miss a few details that he should have learned about sooner.

The fact that Vulcan did not see fit to inform Ves showed that their bond was not entirely perfect!

Director Samandra Avikon observed the patriarch's expression carefully and felt she needed to intervene.

"You seem to be under the impression that churches exert an adverse influence on people."

"Can you blame me? I've seen what faith can do when it goes too far. The moment humans stop thinking for themselves, the moment they become enslaved to a small group of people who call the shots. It is too easy to turn normal people into uncritical, unthinking drones that automatically shout specific slogans. What is worse is that these

indoctrinated fools can easily be converted into warriors of faith and do all kinds of stupid stuff. You only need to look at states like the Vulcan Empire to see how easy it is to instigate billions of people into committing violence."

"You are only looking at one side of the coin." Samandra Avikon shook her head in disapproval. "Different faiths come in all shapes and sizes. Not all of them produce a negative impact on society. Just as there are good pioneers in the Red Ocean, there are bad pioneers. You wouldn't allow the latter to define the entire group, right? The same goes for churches. Each of them need to be evaluated by their own merits, not the preconceived notions that you hold and unjustly apply to everything that has any relation to belief in a greater existence."

"It's completely unnecessary for humans to believe in anyone aside from themselves! Our race has no need for faith in these modern times! Whenever we are faced with a problem, we no longer have to pray to an illusionary sky god and rationalize everything based on unfalsifiable assumptions. We have learned that we are better off with picking up our tools and fixing the problems through the use of advanced technology and methods."

"What you are describing are two different things." The woman spoke. "I have no doubt that technology has been a boon to our race, but if you think that human life has made faith redundant, then think again. Look at these people who have taken time off their valuable schedules to visit our fine church. What do you see?"

He indulged her for a moment and scrutinized the workers who visited the renovated establishment for one reason or another.

"I see craftsmen and artisans who are eager to get their next fix."

"That is not true, sir. In fact, we explicitly tried to reduce the exploitative nature of our business model. The majority of these visitors have never experienced the full glow from a Vulcan totem. The reason why many of these workers eagerly visit our church is not to turn themselves into unthinking drones of the Church of Vulcan, but to gain a moment to interrupt their busy work routines. Look closer."

"I am already looking at the visitors. What is it you are trying to tell me?" Ves skeptically frowned.

"Do you see that they are suffering, patriarch? Do they look as if they are being forced to attend? I think not. They enjoy spending time here, and I do not blame them. The glows of the totems may not be particularly strong when they are in their passive modes, but every member of our Association enjoys them nonetheless because they can sit down and contemplate their work under better conditions than before."

The head of the Creation Association gestured to another part of the hall where a group of dozen different craftsmen had gathered together to chat and socialize with each other.

"Our church has also become a gathering point for like-minded people. Our halls have welcomed many visitors who have undergone a lot of upheaval by moving to a completely new environment. Aside from the people they traveled with, everyone else around them are strangers who come from many different corners of human society. What we offer to our members is an open meeting ground where diverse people can come together and befriend each other through their shared passions and respect for Vulcan."

All of that sounded nice, but what did that have to do with faith?

"People can meet each other outside of churches, you know." He said. "There are bars, cafes, symposiums, virtual communities and more. Sure, the Creation Association is a little different from them, but that doesn't mean you have to convert it into a full-blown church!"

"You are correct." Samandra Avikon conceded. "We did not have to turn this fine structure into a more beautiful church, yet we did. Aside from taking advantage of the tax exemptions offered by the government, we have clearly noticed that for all of your assumptions, there are people who seek greater meaning in their lives."

Ves scratched his head. "You've lost me there. Explain this reasoning, please."

"This is a deep and profound topic that I can discuss for many days, but the premise is rather simple. Not every human possesses blind faith in technology and materialism such as yourself. There are people among us who are not satisfied with blindly attending school, earning their diplomas and starting their work as if they are bots. Humans are not cogs in a machine, but our society tries its best to make this happen because that is how it can run more efficiently. Life is about more than productivity. Life is about enjoyment, contribution, meaning, purpose and fulfillment. I think that all mech designers should understand this sentiment."

She was right in a sense. The issue she was speaking about was an age-old problem in human society ever since industrialization first emerged a long time ago on Old Earth.

However, that did not make Ves convinced that faith was the answer.

"There are many secular alternatives for people to find greater meaning and purpose in their lives." He told her. "Encouraging people to turn into blind worshipers is not necessary."

"I respectfully have to disagree with you." Samandra plainly said. "It may be difficult for you to acknowledge this, but in the hyper-materialistic cosmos we live in today, there is

a greater pressure for humans to find spiritual sustenance. What we offer to the craftsmen and any other humans who are interested in what we stand for is a safe and positive sanctuary for them to fill the void within themselves."

That caused Ves to look at the visitors in a different way. As he studied their moods, their expressions, their stress levels and their physical states, he felt that they did not seem negatively impacted in any fashion.

There were clear differences between the guests who had just entered the enormous hall compared to the ones that have been here for a while.

Each time they knelt or stood respectfully in front of one of the totems of Vulcan, they acted as if they silently shared their burdens to a parent.

Whether they received the relief they desired or not, most people looked to be in peace by the time they retreated.

When Ves quietly connected to Vulcan and tapped into the prayers and worship that the spiritual incarnation constantly received, he noted that the design spirit actually listened to them at a less-than-conscious level. Not only that, the spirit occasionally responded in a subtle manner, giving the more earnest and worthy of believers a small push in the right direction!

This was actually a fairly small operation to Vulcan, so much so that his main consciousness never even thought about it. Spiritual entities could do this because they were not bound by mortal limitations.

Despite how little this impacted Vulcan as a whole, the people who regularly prayed to him became affected to a much more substantial degree!

An answer or simple validation from Vulcan was all that people needed to release their stress, regain their confidence or find the courage they needed to embark on a risky venture.

Though Ves personally thought that the deceptive nature of this operation was simply a way to encourage more people into thinking that Vulcan was a literal god, the benefits to them were not question.

"Okay." Ves sighed. "I can acknowledge that this 'church' is not as bad as others, but what are you going to do with all of the faithful that have emerged?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"



"We are not the Vulcan Faith." Samandra emphasized. "We have no desire to engage in politics or force a specific lifestyle onto groups of people. We do not seek to turn this church into an activist center. We have no intention to convert the population of this planet to our faith by force. The Creation Association will always remain a free, open and inviting sanctuary for every individual, with a specific focus on the makers and creators who Vulcan appeals to the most."

## Chapter 4694: Expanding the Flock

What happened here was not ideal, but it would do more harm than good to turn it back to its original form.

The Enlightened Church of Vulcan helped too many people and converted so many different believers that the Creation Association would definitely incur a backlash if it got rid of all of its overly religious aspects.

Aside from that, trying to break or reduce people's relationship with Vulcan would have an adverse effect on the growth of his spiritual incarnation.

Samandra Avikon successfully argued to Ves that if he wanted Vulcan to grow faster and become exposed to more craftsmen throughout the Red Ocean, he needed to set aside some of his most rigid objections.

"You can't have your cake and eat it too, patriarch." She argued with him. "The purest faith and devotion that is freely given to a divine existence is one of the most sacred and intimate acts in life. Please respect the faithful who for one reason or another found their source of spiritual sustenance in Vulcan."

He sighed yet again. "Fine. These people can do what they want as long as you don't turn them crazy somehow. Let's talk about more practical matters. How many members does the Creation Association have these days?"

"Over 100,000 people, but many of them have only signed up for the lowest tier of membership that we offer. The fees they pay are minimal and they generally do not take part in many of the activities that we organize. A much smaller proportion of members have decided to increase their commitment, but they also gain more benefits in return. Many of them tend to be senior production workers or master artisans who require more guidance and structure in their busy, stressful lives."

The woman spent the next few minutes detailing the kind of services they provide to the higher level members.

Aside from putting in a good word to Vulcan, the workers of the Creation Association also acted as counsel and advisors.

All in all, the Creation Association took on a lot more responsibilities than at the start.

Ves placed his hands on his hips. "You do know that I set this all up so that I can sell more totems and earn more money from their usage, right?"

The robed woman shook her head. "Money should not be your primary concern anymore. The clan has other sources of income that can cover for its expenditures. What is truly important to you is to connect Vulcan to more people. Changing our status from a generic non-profit organization to a religious institution helps us to connect to a wider audience of individuals who seek relief from their overly materialistic lives."

"That sounds nice, but how much revenue is the Creation Association making these days?"

"Around 2000 MTA credits a year, but we spend much of that on various investments such as building additional churches on other industrial planets."

"I see."

Although 2000 MTA credits meant little to Ves these days, it was still a massive amount of wealth to nearly every other person in the Krakatoa Middle Zone!

The spending power of 2000 MTA credits was extremely high in most second-rate states in the old galaxy.

Even in a busy place like the Red Ocean where all of the prices were inflated, 2000 MTA credits could easily be used to fund the creation of a mercenary outfit or a modest mech company!

The investments that Samandra was referring to had to be massive.

"How many branches have you set up so far?" Ves asked.

"We have built over 200 different branches up to this point, though many of them are rather small and staffed by only a handful of employees at most. The majority are located in the star systems aligned to Davute, though we have made a greater effort to expand outside of this sphere as of late. The more people become aware of Vulcan and the Creation Association, the more convenient it is for us to establish branches in more distant territories."

"I see." Ves looked impressed. "Your expansion progress exceeds that of the rest of our clan. I did not expect that out of all of our institutions, it would be yours that has made the greatest progress."

Even if most of the branches were little more than rented offices that accommodated a couple of people at most, that still meant that the Larkinsons had managed to establish a foothold on a planet!

This was what Ves sought the most. A foothold allowed the Larkinson Clan to integrate into the local scene and gain a deeper understanding of local conditions.

He talked a bit more with Samandra Avikon about the expansion strategy of the Creation Association.

It turned out that aside from setting up branches in the middle zones, she had already set her sights on the lower zones!

The woman explained her rationale for setting up branches in the lower zones.

"I am aware that our clan has long ceased to orient much of its business operations towards third-raters, but that does not mean they serve no use to us anymore. To a deity like Vulcan, humans are all equal for the most part. It makes little to no difference whether his flock consists of second-raters or third-raters. I believe that the same goes for first-raters."

Ves never thought about this topic from this angle, but she was pretty much correct!

The spirituality of a citizen of the New Rubarth Empire wasn't inherently stronger than that of an ordinary citizen of the Bright Republic.

The material differences between a mecher and a space peasant from a third-rate state may be so enormous that they might as well belong to two separate species, but in terms of spirituality they might as well be identical!

While there were definitely a lot of amazing transcendents among the Big Two and the first-rate superstates whose metaphysical attributes had reached amazing levels, they were so few in number that they did not affect the overall statistics.

As such, if the Creation Association wanted to expand quicker while spending less money, it was a great idea to expand its presence in the neglected lower zones of the Red Ocean!

Ves grew more intrigued. "How is the reception over there? Is it easy for the Creation Association to found branches in a lower zone?"

"The reception is no different than the reception in a middle zone, sir. To what extent people will embrace Vulcan depends on other factors such as fame and word of mouth. Regardless, since our Creation Association is classified as a second-class organization, we cannot directly apply our standards in a lower zone. We have to abide by the prevailing rules, which means that we must recruit external personnel in order to

manage the branches on our behalf. The facilities we have built on third-class planets are also of the same standard. That makes them cheap but also limited."

The manpower issue was the greatest problem. In order for the third-class employees of the Creation Association to represent the organization and Vulcan properly, they needed to be screened before undergoing an intensive training program.

"These third-class employees aren't actual members of our clan, right?"

"No. Not immediately, at least." Samandra replied. "We have drawn from the Retainer Policy of our clan to turn them into our representatives without fully bringing them into our clan. The rules remain the same for all retainers. If they have acted improperly, they will be fired from their jobs. If they have earned a great amount of merit or served us loyally for many decades, then they may apply to join our clan and enjoy the same rights and privileges as any other clansmen, provided they pass our inspections. This chance alone has made it extremely easy for us to staff our branches in the lower zones with competent, diligent, loyal and most importantly enthusiastic employees."

He could easily see how this strategy could bloom in the coming years. The cost of setting up a branch on a planet in a lower zone was a fraction of doing the same in a middle zone!

The differences in expenses were so vast that with the current levels of revenue of the Creation Association, it should easily be possible to set up thousands of branches in the coming years!

Of course, it was not that easy to set up a branch in an unfamiliar place.

"Our clan does not have a close connection to third-raters anymore, so it is difficult for us to approach, connect and obtain the agreement of willing partners in the lower zones." Samandra explained. "We are trying to improve our capacity to engage with third-raters, but we find that specific colonies, administrations and cultures have different tolerances for us. Some do not care about our arrival while others strongly disapprove or outright hate what we are trying to introduce to their lives. This is also a problem for our second-class branches."

Ves rubbed his hairless chin. "Which sort of locations do you encounter the most opposition?"

"It would have to be closed societies and population centers that are already captured by different faiths, sir. The former mostly come in the form of a settlement that is reigned by controlling tyrants. These despots have a low tolerance of any influences that are not under their direct control. The latter are worse for us. Just as there is competition in the business arena, there is also competition in the faith arena. Any religious organization that has already 'captured the market' of a planet will fiercely defend what they have, because if they do not do so, they will inevitably lose their accrued advantages."

Human-occupied space in the Red Ocean functioned as a melting pot where people who originated from every part of the Milky Way gathered together in relatively small and compressed territories.

That had the consequences of bringing a lot of different churches together!

Many of them used to be strong in specific regions of the Milky Way, but never conflicted with too many other faiths because they were too far apart from each other.

This was not the case anymore once they all began to occupy the same zones and star systems in the Red Ocean!

As these old faiths who already attained a lot of success in the old galaxy tried to spread their gospel to the new frontier, they found that they needed to become a lot more aggressive in order to prevent them from losing all of their devoted (and donating) followers!

This did not surprise Ves that much. "People of strong faith reject other faiths the most. It is quite ironic in that sense. In contrast, it should be much easier to build a following for Vulcan in more secularist environments as they are largely unclaimed by highly protective religious institutions."

Of course, trying to convert secularists came with its own fair share of challenges, but the Creation Association enjoyed several advantages that significantly reduced its difficulties.

First, Vulcan was a real existence who actually responded to at least some of the silly prayers that he received.

Second, the totems sold by the Creation Association provided real and amazing benefits that could not be explained with conventional science!

"Much of the revenue earned by the Creation Association is through the usage fees of its totems, right?" Ves asked.

"Correct, but we toned it down in order to give our critics and opponents less ammunition. We raised the price and reduced the frequency in which the totems can bless different craftsmen with invaluable insights and inspiration to at least once every three months for the largest and most expensive totem."

That was still a fairly quick interval for a craftsman to receive an effect that was effectively a watered-down version of getting hit by the Hammer of Brilliance!

"How goes the effort to produce totems in-house without requiring my direct intervention?"

That was a problem that Ves eagerly wanted to solve. In the past, it had always been necessary for him to make the totems by hand, which severely limited the amount that the Creation Association could distribute to interested members.

However, Ves or rather Vulcan came up with a possible approach that might allow third parties to produce qualified totems that could function just as well as the original product!

Samandra had been waiting for this question. She smiled and gestured to Ves to follow her to a different hall.

"I believe it is better to show you in person. Come this way, please. Our workshops are located underground."

## **Chapter 4695: Totem Advancements**

"How much does it cost to receive Vulcan's greater blessing?"

Samandra smiled. "We raised the price from 1 MTA credit to 10 MTA credits after conducting a great amount of market research. Nowadays, only older master craftsmen who have remained stuck in their respective line of work for many decades are willing to pay at least that much and more to receive the crucial impulse they need to break through their respective bottlenecks. This is more than a fair price to charge for life-changing progress."

She made a good point. Ves recalled the time where he hit then-Professor Benedict Cortez with a hammer.

Suffice to say, the results were dramatic as the highly experienced mech designer spontaneously tied a lot of different data points and theories together in a way that he had never done before!

Knowing that Vulcan's influence could play a dramatic role to any mech designer below the Master Mech Designer level, Ves became more curious at how many of them became attracted by the benefits that Vulcan offered.

"What is the proportion of mech designers among the craftsmen that have become members of the Creation Association?"

"It is not as high as you think." She responded. "According to our current statistics, only 7 percent of our entire registered member base are mech designers. The proportion of engineers who are related to the mech industry in a wider sense is larger, but as far as actual mech designers are concerned, not many of them recognize the appeal of worshipping Vulcan even if they learn about him through word of mouth."

"Let me guess. These mech designers don't believe that Vulcan can help them through our totems, is that correct?"

Director Samandra Avikon nodded in a weary manner. "Mech designers generally have a strong belief in themselves. Many of them have attitudes that are similar to yours. They think they can invent and engineer their way out of any problem. It is not easy for them to admit that they need help, let alone pray to a god."

"Well, it's their loss, then. Vulcan should truly be able to give them a hand if they are receptive enough."

Ves didn't blame these people. What the Creation Association tried to push onto its members was too weird and new. Without experiencing its effects in person, it was far too hard for others to believe in the outlandish claims surrounding these mystical objects.

Totems of Vulcan were responsible for keeping the Creation Association afloat and delivering more spiritual feedback to his spiritual incarnation.

They were nothing but statues of varying sizes that were not only made in the image of Vulcan, but also possessed a spiritual connection to the design spirit.

Unlike the mechs that Ves designed on a regular basis, it was a lot more troublesome to ensure that totems produced by people other than himself contained this connection!

This was a common problem that every mech designer suffered from. Their specialization in mechs allowed them to break past the technical limitations of everything that was directly related to mechs, but it did not extend to other product types.

Ves strongly speculated that only Star Designers broke this powerful limitation.

He did not let this annoyance stop him, though. As someone who dabbled with spiritual engineering for a long time, he already accrued a lot of experience in solving long-standing problems through innovative and radical means.

At a certain point in the last few years, he realized that he differed from other mech designers by the fact that he had Vulcan.

If Ves couldn't accomplish this task, why not rely on Vulcan instead?

With that logic, he tasked the Creation Association to hire artisans who were strong adherents of Vulcan and see if they could find a way to design and create totems on their own from start to finish.

This was an important step to expanding the Creation Association across the Red Ocean!

Ves entered the workshop with much expectation and trepidation. The bronze-like steps that led to the first underground floor were shallow but exaggeratingly wide, making him feel as if he was slowly descending to a hidden sanctum.

Once they reached the bottom, Samandra Avikon knocked on the large double doors, causing them to swing open just enough to allow the two to enter.

The workshop hall looked reassuringly well-organized and well-equipped to Ves. The environment here was much cleaner and more well-lit in order to facilitate proper hand work.

Ves immediately noted the lack of advanced production equipment. "I can understand why you haven't acquired a superfab as they are too expensive, but where are the 3D printers? Where are the other large-scale production machines?"

The robed woman frowned. "Please remember where we are, sir. We are standing in the most sacred workshop encompassing the sanctuary we have raised in Vulcan's name. It is disrespectful to rely on automation and highly machine dependent production methods. In this workshop, we only engage in the most earnest forms of craftsmanship. Also, we have learned through trial and error that our efforts have a higher chance of success if our artisans work more with their hands rather than inputting commands in a high-tech device."

The only argument that mattered was the last one. The rest was mere window dressing as far as Ves was concerned.

He did have to admit that the sight of dozens of different artisans working together or by themselves had an uplifting effect.

Ves could sense that each of the people who received the privilege of working on this sacred floor possessed a strong and earnest belief in Vulcan.

Many of the people working in the workshop were metalworkers, sculptors, painters and other traditional craftsmen. Each of them displayed great skills and some were clearly at the master level in their respective professions.

As Ves and Director Samandra Avikon stepped closer, hardly any of the craftsmen took notice of the new arrivals.

The artists and artisans were so engrossed and concentrated in their own work that they refused to get distracted by external factors.



This reminded Ves a lot of himself. Only the most passionate and engaged workers could enter into this special state of zen.

As Ves continued to observe these artisans at work, he began to sense some of the mystery that caused this workshop to be different from other places.

Not only did strategically placed totems of Vulcan ensure that the entire space was constantly bathed with a subtle but constant glow that promoted craftsmanship, but the work being done in this hall began to resemble a ritual of sorts.

The passion, concentration and desire generated by so many artisans working in close proximity to each other generated a faint but invisible form of resonance that aligned with Vulcan's domain.

All kinds of small and subtle background interactions took place that ultimately produced positive effects that would definitely affect the end products!

In order to confirm the theories that were surging in his mind, Ves approached the far side of the hall where dozens of finished test products had been placed in a display area.

What impressed him the most was that each of them were actually totems!

Although most of them possessed such a faint connection to Vulcan that they were pretty much useless, it was already a massive achievement to get this far in only a couple of years!

"Wait a minute. The materials used to make these items look incredibly familiar..."

Samandra caught up to him and smiled at the statues and other knick-knacks. "As we have said, we are constantly engaged in trial and error. Our craftsmen have experimented with a wide variety of materials, but they found that metals are more respective to Vulcan. We subsequently tried out many different mundane metals and metallic exotics. One day, one of our blacksmiths suggested that we employ the exact same type of alloys that are used in the mechs that you have designed in the past. We requested a batch of materials from the Cat Nest and started to work on them, and that has eventually led to this result."

"Strange... but amazing."

Ves couldn't fully explain why this worked out better than the alternatives. He could guess at the logic but not the exact mechanisms.

Still, that was what trial and error was for. By trying out a lot of stuff, there were always chances of making new and unexpected discoveries!

He immediately felt more enriched. The discoveries made by the craftsmen affiliated with the Creation Association filled a small but important gap in his theoretical framework.

That said, this was not enough.

"Are there any better works?" He asked.

"There are. Let me show you where our best artisans work."

They moved out of the large communal hall and entered one of the more private but also more luxuriously outfitted work rooms.

Only a single metalworker was working on a life-sized totem of Vulcan. The figure patiently used his large and meaty hands to hold a high-power sanding tool that persistently grinded against the surface of a metal object.

This was tough and tiring work, especially when the totem in question was made out of a second-class alloy that was designed to withstand damage inflicted by mechs!

Nonetheless, the exquisite details of the nearly completed totem along with the utter concentration and focus exhibited by the master artisan exceeded anything that Ves had witnessed in the previous hall.

What gratified Ves a lot was that the totem depicted Vulcan as a human that looked remarkably similar to himself!

As Ves studied metal sculpture to a greater degree, he picked up several remarkable details.

One of the finer aspects that the master craftsman did right was that the totem possessed the cleanest spiritual foundation that he had seen so far. It was already noticeably more coherent and focused than what he had seen from the rejected objects that he passed by a moment earlier.

Of course, the totem wasn't alive, but that didn't matter too much in this context.

What truly surprised Ves was the spiritual connections of the totem. It held a stronger connection to Vulcan than normal, but what actually caused this work to stand out was that it had also started to form a faint and weak connection to himself!

What the hell?

Ves belatedly remembered that he had also become an existence closer to a design spirit himself. He had acquired his own glow though he always suppressed it to the

strongest degree possible because he didn't want to annoy the people around him with the spiritual manifestation of his ego.

Still, if anyone were to make a product that made use of himself as a glow, it should have been Ves!

What this exactly did to the totem, Ves wasn't entirely sure, but right now his interest had shifted to the master artisan responsible for creating this astonishing work!

Ves took care not to raise his voice or step any closer than necessary. As a creator himself, he knew how rage-inducing it was to break a moment of utter concentration. It might even cause the totem to fail to reach its potential!

He slowly turned to Samandra Avikon. "Who is this guy?"

"You have the distinct pleasure of observing Master Blacksmith Rogha Dunnerholm."

"Where does he come from? How come he is able to forge such a close connection to Vulcan in his work?"

"That is because he knows Vulcan longer than you have been alive." Samandra respectfully replied. "For 80 years, he not only grew up worshiping Vulcan alongside everyone in his state, but he has also devoted himself to traditional blacksmithing in order to devote himself further to the deity that forms the center of his belief. The fall of the Vulcan Empire has been a devastating and traumatic event for many of its citizens, but a master blacksmith of Dunnerholm's skills easily managed to secure a way out. He has wandered for several years since, but eventually arrived in the new frontier and sought us out to confirm that we are tied to the same god that he prayed to all his life."

"Did he... did he find the god he was looking for?" Ves slowly asked.

"He did."

Ves had already noticed that the master blacksmith was a heavy gravity variant human. There was no mistaking this body type.

He did not immediately think that the bearded dwarf originated from the Vulcan Empire. Dwarves could be found in many parts of human space, and only a minority of them had any relations to the Vulcan Faith of the past.

It still came as a surprise to Ves that he actually became reunited with a Vulcanite once again!

## **Chapter 4696: The Strength of a Mortal Craftsman**

It turned out that the best craftsman working under the roof of the so-called Enlightened Church of Vulcan originated from the dwarven state that Ves had created and destroyed at his own hand.

There was a profound sense of irony in this confluence of events.

Ves thought that his meeting with the Iron Emperor was the last time he ever dealt with the radicalized and misguided members of the only true dwarven state to have existed in human space up to this point.

Of course, the legacy of the Vulcan Empire still haunted him to a degree.

He had most certainly caught the news about the ambitious dwarven ruler's attempt to gather the dwarven diaspora.

Vulcan even played a key role in furthering Rion Aaden's great ambition towards dwarvenkind.

Ves did not think that a strong-willed and visionary dwarf would go through all of this effort just to increase the voice of heavy gravity variant humans!

However, even if the Iron Emperor rejected the status quo and tried to implement a master plan that would most certainly shake the rest of human society, what did it have to do with Ves?

As soon as he completed the commission to make a fancy crown for the driven dwarf, Ves shed all responsibility for what happened next!

Human space was immense. The chances of encountering each other was next to nil unless either of them deliberately sought each other out, which shouldn't happen.

Ves had no desire to reunite with the Iron Emperor, while the former ruler of the Vulcan Empire sounded like he was having a good time hobnobbing with first-class dwarves.

Yet by making this assumption, Ves had made a huge oversight.

He treated the Iron Emperor as the only significant survivor to have made it out of the Vulcan Empire after its collapse.

That was a gross oversimplification as millions if not billions of citizens of that doomed state managed to hop into a ship and evacuate from the Smiling Samuel Star Sector.

Most of the Vulcanites should have probably dispersed. Even if they had any desire to reunite with each other, they should have answered the call of the Iron Emperor and flocked to one of his dwarven refuges.

What was a Vulcanite like Master Blacksmith Rogha Dunnerhold doing in Davute and in the headquarters of the Creation Association no less?!

"The man toured our facility before we converted it to a church and insisted on being inducted in our organization." Director Samandra Avikon softly said to Ves as they both watched the craftsman at work. "He made this decision as soon as he studied the totems we put on display."

"Did he tell you why he wanted to be here so badly?" Ves whispered back.

"The man declined to offer too much clarification. He only shared that he was a Vulcanite and that he had always adhered to the traditional Vulcan Faith in the decades he was alive. After working with us for a longer time, we gradually learned more details about him. You can be assured that he does not pose a threat to you and us. His faith in Vulcan is as strong as ever, though he is confused how Vulcan and you tie together. One of the urges that drove him to come all of the way here was to seek clarification about the relationship between you and the god he has always worshiped. He will immediately question you as soon as he completes his current work session."

Ves wanted to groan. "Great. This could go quite badly, do you know that? If I don't satisfy this dwarf, we may potentially lose a fantastic master blacksmith and one who appears to be the closest to replicating effective totems for the Creation Association."

"I have faith that you will be able to navigate your fateful talk with Dunnerholm with great skill and benevolence.."

"Thank you for your completely useless vote of confidence."

It looked as if it would take a while for the dwarven artisan to complete his work for this session. He transmitted a message to his wife to inform her that he might take a bit of time before he returned. If the kids got bored of the church, Gloriana might as well take them out and explore the other venues in the bustling Commercial District.

After he had taken this step, he settled in for a lengthy wait.

Though he specialized in mechs, Ves appreciated all forms of sincere craftsmanship.

Master blacksmiths distinguished themselves from ordinary ones by their great skill, experience, creativity and philosophy.

Although these highly skilled and renowned creators might not employ any spiritual shenanigans to create works that transcended the average, that made them more impressive in his eyes.

It showed that individuals did not need to be Master Mech Designers or anything similar to it in order to create masterworks.

For all that mech designers transformed the industrial landscape of human civilization, their increasingly more transhuman traits also caused much of humanity's technological innovation to go askew.

The ability of high-ranking mech designers to create works that bent or distorted the laws of reality could not easily be explained through pure science, and that turned them into troublesome engineers.

One of the biggest foundations of human science was that their theories could be tested and that their inventions could be reproduced!

If either of these actions couldn't be performed, then it was extremely difficult for mech designers to advance the state of human technology to a significant degree.

Only at the Master Mech Designer stage could mech designers gain the possibility to deconstruct the scientific principles behind their amazing work.

That didn't mean it happened all of the time. The more difficult and convoluted the innovation, the more a mech designer had to depend on ingenuity and hard work in order to turn their work into systemic improvements!

Mech designers and other craftsmen followed two different trajectories. The former may have been able to help human civilization advance its technology by considerable leaps, but the latter also served a vital role to human society.

The persisting encroachment of industrialization and automation constantly tried to make human artisans extinct entirely, but fortunately there were still enough people who appreciated traditional craftsmanship.

Aside from providing extremely wealthy clients with customized pieces of high-end artisanal works, craftsmen also played an important role in developing new products. They often did so by finding new ways to combine existing tech.

Right now, Ves had the sense that Master Blacksmith Dunnerholm was doing exactly that, but not with conventional technology, but rather spiritual engineering!

Oh, the dwarf was not remarkable from a spiritual perspective. The man had lived so long and spent much of that practicing his ability to work with metal, but none of that persistence translated into overcoming his spiritual deficiency.

The older dwarf was pretty much a norm as far as Ves was concerned. His children who had less than a tenth of the lifespan of Rogha Dunnerholm were countless times stronger in a spiritual sense!

Yet if he asked any of his children to create any work that could surpass the efforts of Dunnerholm, Ves doubted they could do so without resorting to extremely unusual tricks!

What Ves found puzzling at first was how Master Dunnerholm was able to work with design spirits without possessing any active spirituality.

It sounded as weird as trying to eat a bowl of soup without a spoon. How the hell was someone supposed to eat the soup without a utensil without picking up the bowl and drinking it directly?

"Shouldn't the answer be obvious, sir?" Director Samandra Avikon look at Ves with her disconcerting glowing reptilian orange eyes. "It is faith. I have always believed that humans as well as other forms of organic life possess far greater power than what is obvious from the surface. Life is a strange and powerful phenomenon to begin with. Think about what people can do when they devote their entire minds to a singular cause and purpose. Think about what happens when that cause happens to be a sentient, immortal and powerful existence. Does it not make sense that a small portion of power from that all-powerful existence flows down to an earnest believer?"

Faith. It all came down to faith as far as the woman was concerned.

Though Ves did not like her answer in the slightest, he respected her enough to evaluate her theory by its merits.

When he looked back at Master Dunnerholm and tried to see whether any of this faith stuff was affecting him in a way, he could see hints of what she described!

He initially thought that the small bond that Master Dunnerholm formed with Vulcan was a one-way street.

What actually happened was that Dunnerholm's strong concentration and beliefs somehow generated a subtle form of resonance with Vulcan!

The consequences of this were many, but the most important one was that Dunnerholm became so close to his god that he was actually able to borrow a tiny portion of Vulcan's great power!

"This..."

Ves became shocked by this realization!

Here was a highly skilled but otherwise mundane master blacksmith who succeeded in finding a way to create a spiritual totem that could normally only be done by Ves or Vulcan!

"I think I get what is taking place here."

After studying the dwarf at work for a while now, Ves noted that Dunnerholm possessed an exceptionally high degree of concentration.

The dwarf could probably match or exceed Ves in this aspect, and this was a remarkable observation as he had never seen anyone else beat him in this aspect!

This intense concentration not only allowed the master blacksmith to stick to a single idea and vision throughout his work, but also helped him stick to some sort of frequency that allowed him to become receptive to Vulcan.

As long as Dunnerholm's concentrated mind came close to matching this frequency, a new and subtle form of resonance took place, causing the dwarf to borrow a small part of Vulcan's immensely broad and powerful craftsmanship ability!

"In other words, it is not just Dunnerholm working on this totem. Vulcan is involved to a small degree."

The implications of discovering this phenomenon was massive.

For the first time in his life, Ves witnessed a truly productive and benign product of faith.

Instead of driving believers into becoming violent or suicidal fanatics, the power of faith could enable a person to pull off transcendent feats despite the fact that he was still a mortal!

"Of course! Belief is not as useless and redundant as I thought. The answer was in front of me all this time. Our clan has been making use of the power of faith for a long time!"

He eventually connected the faith expressed by Master Dunnerholm with the strong and uniform faith expressed by the mech pilots who had been trained into pulling off battle formations.

In the latter case, mech pilots utilized their power of faith to not only align themselves with each other, but also do their best to resonate with a greater existence that was capable of feeding power back through this mystical connection!

The Penitent Sisters, the Glory Seekers and the Swordmaidens had launched so many battle formation attacks by now that Ves had grown a lot more familiar with the mechanisms and the properties of this phenomenon.

Yet just because mech pilots were the most prominent people to empower themselves with the power of resonance did not mean that it was exclusive to their profession!

Others could exhibit and gain strength from resonance as well!



In this case, a single master blacksmith was able to replicate the effect of a battle formation to a tiny degree in order to create a working spiritual totem that normal people could never make by themselves!

Ves suddenly became struck by a brilliant if radical idea!

"What if... there is a way to emulate the effect of a battle formation in a productive context rather than a combat situation?"

This couldn't be classified as a battle formation anymore for obvious reasons.

"It would instead be known as a ritual..."

## **Chapter 4697: Pronounce Judgment**

Ritual was a loaded word.

Whenever Ves thought about this word, he thought about cultists gathering together around a pentagram that held an unknown but no doubt nefarious meaning.

These stereotypical evil cultists garbed in face-obscuring black robes chanted unintelligible words while holding aloft serpentine daggers.

Meanwhile a head priest presided over the ritual by standing in the center while looming over a captive prisoner that had been affixed to a demonic altar.

Once the ritual reached the climax, the head priest sank his own dagger through the heart of the helpless captive, causing copious amounts of blood to spill from the altar and filling up the grooves on the floor.

The cultists then proceeded to make the ultimate sacrifice without thought by sinking their own daggers through their chests!

As each of these brainwashed schmucks dropped to the floor, their blood entered the grooves that made up the pentagram and completely filled it up to the brim.

This caused the pentagram to draw from the power of life and enact a powerful but completely tainted procedure that caused the head priest to laugh in a maniacal fashion!

"HAHAHAHAHA!" The man garbed in an elaborate robe burst out while lifting up his arms. "The old gods shall rise again! Awaken from your slumber and accept this humble sacrifice of mine! Hear the call of your devotees and bestow us with your dark blessing!"

The head priest's efforts soon yielded a result as the man abruptly stopped laughing as his body started to convulse.

Soon enough, screams escaped from his throat as the 'blessing' of his deity turned out to be anything but as his body soon morphed into a reptilian monster that had lost all of its rationality!

Ves shook his head to clear his mind of this image.

Whether there was any basis of truth to this lurid portrayal of rituals, Ves vowed to be careful in its usage.

As for whether the peaceful counterparts of battle formations were in any way viable, Ves had a strong suspicion that this was the case.

He recalled the rituals that people conducted in the past.

He remembered the elaborate ceremonies that he organized in order to birth the Superior Mother. The exaggerated use of people and causing them to be arranged in a highly symbolic manner may have actually produced a substantial boost to the creation of the design spirit!

Of course, there was no way for Ves to prove that all of these exaggerated measures produced a substantial effect. It was not as if he could attempt to create another Superior Mother but in complete isolation so that he had enough material to conduct a comparison study.

This was why Ves had remained ambivalent about rituals for a long time. They were too difficult to test in practice and it seemed that he was doing fine without making use of them in his projects.

It was natural for him to dismiss the power of rituals. Not only did people develop all kinds of weird ideas about them, Ves also didn't need to resort to it in the first place.

He possessed more than enough strength to design and fabricate strong mechs and other products by himself!

It was just like how ace pilots did not need to make use of any battle formations to fight and win their battles. They were so strong that the benefits of battle formations were marginal at best!

However, just because ace pilots with ace mechs possessed the ability to block and shrug off the effects of battle formations for the most part, didn't mean that they were useless.

In situations where ace pilots were too busy with their own affairs or absent in a fight, battle formations were a great way to exert a massive amount of power without the intervention of strong mech pilots!

"If this method works for mech pilots, there is no reason why it shouldn't work with a bunch of craftsmen in a non-combat environment. They just need to possess strong, uniform beliefs!"

As Ves became so inspired by this radical notion that he already started to draft an ambitious experiment in his mind, the noises generated by the sanding tool held by Rogha Dunnerholm abruptly ceased at this time.

After working on grinding down and polishing the hard but exquisite metal statue of Vulcan in his human guise, the master blacksmith finally exited his highly concentrated mental state and wearily regained his situational awareness.

The moment the dwarf slowly put down the tool and turned around, he fell completely still.

He only registered Ves' presence now, which was quite remarkable as the patriarch of the Larkinson Clan possessed a strong presence.

The bearded dwarf glanced at Ves' face and scrutinized it as if to ensure that it matched the face of his latest totem!

Once Dunnerholm became satisfied with that, the dwarf roamed his body across Ves' body beneath his understated outfit.

The dwarf stopped at the toolbelt that Ves wore.

No matter how much Ves wanted to dress down, he was not going to abandon all of his tools and gadgets that came in handy in different situations.

His plentiful experiences with trying to survive during a crisis had taught Ves that it was always best to be prepared!

He would rather bear the discomfort for bringing so many different devices on his person 99 percent of the time when it turned out that he sorely needed his tools when the unlikely happened!

Regardless, the dwarf fixated on one tool in particular. Dunnerhold became so fascinated by it that he unconsciously took short but meaty steps forward.

The dwarf finally cracked open his mouth and spoke in his deep and characteristic dwarven voice.

"You... you are Ves Larkinson. You are him, aren't you?"

"That depends on what you are referring to, Mr. Dunnerholm."

The dwarf did not sound entirely coherent at the moment. The master blacksmith became so overwhelmed by meeting Ves in the flesh that he didn't know which of his burning questions he wanted answered first!

Samandra Avikon picked up on this and tried to moderate the exchange. "Master Dunnerholm, haven't you always wanted to question our patriarch about his involvement in the downfall of your former state?"

"Ah, that is correct, ma'am." The older dwarf shifted his gaze away from the tool hanging from Ves' side and focused back on studying the clan patriarch's expression. "Mr. Larkinson, let me ask you a question. Are you responsible for the downfall of the Vulcan Empire?"

"It depends on what you mean by the word 'responsible'. It also depends on whether you consider the crazy actions of your fellow dwarves to be their fault or my fault." Ves replied in an evasive manner.

This caused Dunnerholm to close his eyes for a moment. "Be straight with me, please. I have waited too long to hear a real answer from you. Many surviving Vulcanites are spreading all kinds of stories on the galactic net and to their friends. Truth is being engulfed by lies and biased opinions that I did not know who to trust anymore. Did you truly make those totems of Vulcan in his guise as a human and a dwarf? Did you deliberately spread them out to foment chaos and anarchy?"

"..."

"I need to know, and the only source that can clear the confusion that my fellow survivors and I have grappled with for years. This is why I worked hard to qualify for your Creation Association. While you moved on and proceeded to attain greater feats, many of us drifted without aim or purpose."

Ves and Samandra could feel the depth of pain in the Vulcanite's heart. The man had undergone a traumatic experience years ago and never fully healed from his mental wounds.

This caused Ves to be a little more honest and transparent with the old dwarf. The latter most certainly deserved a straight answer after all of the suffering that he and his people endured!

"If you really want a straight answer from me, then yes, I did create all of those totems." He replied. "I think you must have encountered one in person because you know how to make these totems remarkably well. However, if I have to bear any responsibility for

collapsing the Vulcan Empire that has existed for so many decades, then I should not bear all of it. From my perspective, the radical believers of the Vulcan Faith and the Dwarven God Cult tore your state apart from the inside."

This was an interesting case to Samandra Avikon. "How should the faithful respond when his own god unleashes an apocalypse on their state?"

"Hey! Don't call it an apocalypse! I did no such thing! I never rained down meteorites onto planets or caused a massive space storm to scour every part of the Vulcan Empire of life!" Ves protested.

"You knowingly instigated the Vulcanites to fight against each other. Even if you did not control the minds of the believers of both camps, you still managed to manipulate them in a more indirect manner."

"So?"

"Not every apocalypse has to rain fire and ash. There are doomsdays scenarios that unfold in a much more covert and undetected manner. As long as the outcome remains the same, it should be regarded as an apocalypse."

The dwarven master blacksmith frowned as he tried to follow the conversation. "Does that mean you have single-handedly topped our state by using small and subtle means?"

Ves did not like this question. "It may be difficult to realize this when you were an insider yourself, but now that you have roamed around outside of your previous insular circumstances, you probably learned enough to know that your state was not exactly a model state for both dwarves and humans. Do you acknowledge this, Dunnerholm?"

"Aye... I cannot deny that the Vulcan Empire that I used to be a proud citizen of had degenerated into sectarian strife."

"Not every state deserves to exist." Ves told him in a judgmental tone. "There comes a time where its people have fallen to such an extent that prolonging the status quo does more harm than good. Even without my intervention, the Vulcan Empire would have torn itself apart sooner or later. I just triggered it earlier than scheduled by conducting a little test. So yes, I spread two different kinds of totems throughout the Vulcan Empire."

This was a serious admission and could be used to nail Ves in a court depending on the situation!

As a citizen of the state that became adversely affected by the Larkinson Patriarch, Rogha Dunnerholm finally had the answer he dreaded to obtain but needed to know in order to settle the aches in his heart.

"So you did it after all..." He whispered in a deep but pained voice.

Ves let out a tired breath. "As a master blacksmith, you have surely designed and crafted a lot of products over your long and storied career. I am sure that many of your works satisfied your clients and brought you joy when you completed them. However, it is inevitable for you to work hard but only end up with a disappointing result. Some of them may even be regarded as outright failures. What do you do when you have produced an unqualified work? Would you keep it and pass it on to your client?"

"Never! I would destroy the work with my own hands before I let an unqualified work taint my reputation and profession!" The dwarf spoke with conviction!

A master blacksmith had to keep himself to high standards. There was no way he would gain so much recognition and status if he began to grow lazy and sloppy.

"The same applies to the Vulcan Empire." Ves responded. "While I did not kill all of the dwarves in person and broke up the mighty state with my mech legions, I gave it a test that could make or break its future. Whether your fellow Vulcanites deserved to keep on living in a cesspool of hatred and ignorance was up to them. I never instigated the dwarves to drive themselves into a religious frenzy and commit acts of violence against their former friends and neighbors. In the end, they did that to themselves, and all it took to unleash their darkness was to get their hands on a bunch of funny statues. It is not the totems that destroyed your state, but its own people."

The way Master Dunnerholm fell utterly silent caused Ves to suspect that the dwarf made this conclusion a long time ago. It was not hard to collect the relevant information and put the pieces together.

However, knowing the cold hard truth was one thing. Admitting it was another thing!

## **Chapter 4698: The Right Tool for the Right Job**

The mood in the high-end workshop grew tense and awkward.

It was hard for an old and grizzled survivor of the heyday of the Vulcan Empire to meet the architect of its rapid collapse and downfall.

How would Ves respond if he was in the dwarf's situation?

He didn't know. It was unimaginable that he could be put into this position himself. How he reacted depended heavily on how much he valued his former state and how much blame he laid at the hands of its purported destroyer.

Master Blacksmith Rogha Dunnerholm might lash out and resort to violence. This was the worst case scenario and would instantly cause the Creation Association to lose a powerful and highly capable craftsman.

Ves did not try to avoid this situation, though. This tension between them existed from the start and it would do neither of them any good if this situation dragged on any longer.

If he wanted to form a sincere cooperation with this former Vulcanite, then he needed to seek a confrontation and let the chips fall where they may. Whether Dunnerholm could reconcile himself with this outcome was ultimately up to him and no one else.

As the old, black-bearded dwarf tried to wrap his mind around the answers given by Ves, Dunnerholm eventually shifted his gaze from Ves' face and went back to staring at a prominent tool hanging from his side.

"That hammer of yours... is that one of your totems?" The old dwarf asked as his eyes became more intense.

"You could consider it that." Ves said. "Not all totems are created equal, however. Statues serve an ornamental purpose. They are symbolic in nature but do not serve a direct practical use. This hammer that I made a long time ago is much different. It is a symbol as well as a tool. Would you like to hold it in your hands?"

The offer surprised Dunnerholm.

"You would allow a dwarf, and one from a condemned state at that, to hold your precious tool?"

Ves responded with a generous smile. "Whether you are a normal human or a heavy gravity variant human doesn't matter to me. All I see in front of me is an artisan that has dedicated much of his life to the smithing craft. I have only seen you work on a single product so far, but that is enough for me to see you are a genuine artisan to be respected, even among mech designers such as myself. Anyone who has immersed himself in the crafts as much as you deserves to hold this hammer as far as I am concerned."

He put his words into action by unlatching the hammer from his toolbelt and offering it to the dwarf at an angle.

Master Blacksmith Rogha Dunnerholm didn't often get flustered or taken aback at situations.

At his level of proficiency, he had become accustomed to taking a leading position. His high status and high skill allowed him to take the initiative instead of letting other people take the reins.

However, given how quickly Ves offered Dunnerholm to hold an item that was clearly of incalculable value, the dwarf could no longer reference his ideas on how a meeting between himself and the clan patriarch might unfold.

Ves Larkinson behaved so unpredictably and impulsively that the dwarf could not decide how to respond.

Perhaps this meeting may be a trivial matter to the patriarch of the powerful Larkinson Clan, but the master blacksmith had envisioned and simulated this encounter thousands of times in his mind.

When none of those imagined scenarios came close to matching the current situation, Master Dunnerholm simply short-circuited!

"Well?" Ves said in order to wake up the paralyzed dwarf. "Will you take my hammer and hold the first tool that is created with Vulcan in mind?"

"You would... you would truly allow me to hold it?" The dwarf asked as if he still couldn't believe what was happening.

After all, the older man had just confronted Ves in a less than polite manner!

However, it was exactly because this was not as important to Ves that he was willing to casually hand out his hammer. If it worked out, then that was great. If it did not work out, then at least he tried.

Several heavy seconds passed before the dwarf slowly stretched out his meaty, muscled arm. Dunnerholm's dusky skin made for a stark contrast against Ves' paler hand.

Eventually, the former Vulcanite grasped the handle that Ves freely offered.

From the moment Dunnerholm truly held the hammer, a powerful sense of resonance and fulfillment coursed through his body!

It was as if this was the first time that the dwarf truly met the god that he had worshiped since his birth!

This was an extremely odd statement in itself as Ves initially created Vulcan as a tool of revenge against the Vulcan Empire.

In a way, the current incarnation of Vulcan did not truly exist until Ves stopped by the Smiling Samuel Star Sector and got ambushed by a bunch of man-hating dwarves.

Yet despite this oddity, Rogha Dunnerholm believed with all of his heart that Vulcan had been with him for almost a century!



The god he felt through his grasp must be the deity that had always watched over the Vulcan Empire!

He and every other dwarf who either emigrated to the state or was born in it shouldn't have been wrong about their beliefs.

It should be impossible for all of them to be deluded by a figment of someone's imagination!

As such, Dunnerholm completely did not entertain the idea that Vulcan was a 'young' god who was barely older than Aurelia, but instead thought he was meeting with an ancient mythical 'human' who had reemerged in modern times!

Ves did not deliberately try to confirm or deny any of the dwarf's notions.

It was so easy for Ves to control Vulcan to make an appearance and put on a show of deception. If done the right way, then it would be trivial to twist Dunnerholm's beliefs and convert him into a devoted slave for the rest of his lifespan!

Ves rejected this option, though.

Abhorrent behavior like this would make him no different than those manipulative cult leaders who utilized faith as a tool to control the ignorant masses!

As a proud secularist who believed in the power of rational science and that everything could eventually be explained, Ves did not want to go backwards.

Aside from that, Ves respected a master craftsman too much to mess around with this guy. It was the same for mech designers. As people who earnestly dedicated their lives to mastering a difficult and intricate craft, creators and makers should not try to drag each other down if they were not direct competitors.

Instead, they should seek to empower and improve each other so that they could advance the state of human industry and human technology as a whole!

In a way, the Mech Trade Association likely sprung forth from this collective desire and imperative, and Ves merely followed the same path.

As Dunnerholm resonated with Vulcan to a much more intimate degree than before, a part of him recognized how deeply Ves had favored him with this generous act.

"I have prayed to him all of my life, but this is the first time I have gotten so close to his greatness." The dwarf shakily said as his deep voice seemed to crack. "This is... beyond what I have ever hoped. This hammer... is a sacred object. To hold it in the hands that I have used to emulate and honor Vulcan by mastering a form of craftsmanship is... indescribable."

Much more was going on than a dwarf holding a hammer.

Due to how extensively Vulcan had become intertwined with the hammer that symbolized his domain, touching it was like making direct contact with the design spirit!

As someone who failed to activate his spirituality and lost the opportunity to do so when he had aged past the point where it was possible, Dunnerholm could have toiled for another century or two but never be able to do more than touch Vulcan's shadow!

To be able to go from reluctantly approaching Vulcan through the power of faith and belief to contacting him directly through the medium of a blessed hammer was an opportunity of a lifetime!

Dunnerholm knew hundreds of Vulcanites in his life who would literally kill in order to grasp the handle of this remarkable hammer for even a single second!

There was no way that he would trivialize this moment! Even now, he was committing every experience, every mood swing and every fluctuation into the depths of his heart and mind.

This life-changing experience permanently branded him, causing his life trajectory to take a different course than before!

Once the dwarf finally regained enough awareness, he gripped the hammer tighter in his strong, meaty fingers and stared up at the human who graced him with this blessing.

"You made this hammer, didn't you? It carries all of the hallmarks of your mechs, and more."

"I did." Ves plainly admitted.

""What is its name?"

"I call it the Hammer of Brilliance. It is one of several totems that I have created that have been imbued with a strong and symbiotic connection to a... different existence. I consider it to be an ancestral heirloom that may not seem like much at the start, but will steadily grow stronger and more impressive as time progresses."

The hammer did not look like an unimpressive object to Dunnerholm!

As someone who mastered the art of blacksmithing and worked with metal all of his life, he could definitely say that he had never held a more remarkable and exquisite piece in his life!

Sure, the hammer's initial craftsmanship did not reach his level, but that was hardly important to him. What mattered was that the hammer was not only made along the

lines of Ves' unique design philosophy, but that it had also grown and evolved into a greater object than before!

It was difficult for Dunnerholm to track all of the changes that had taken place after Ves had made this hammer, but as a master blacksmith and a worker who had utilized hammers for his entire career, he could instinctively connect and trace the historical progress it had made.

It helped a lot that the Hammer of Brilliance was a living object in itself. A strong connection formed between the two as the ancestral heirloom not only like Dunnerholm, but freely shared its history and secrets to the dwarf!

Director Samandra Avikon became satisfied with what had happened.

"Mr. Dunnerholm appears to be melding with your hammer to a much greater extent than you, sir."

Ves threw a suspicious glance in her direction. "What are you implying?"

"Perhaps the hammer is better left in Dunnerholm's hand."

This did not entirely surprise Ves. "It is a much more fitting tool in the hand of a blacksmith rather than the hand of a mech designer. Much of my work centers around design rather than production. Even if I get around to making a mech, I make use of large industrial 3D printers or superfabs. Perhaps I might even change my mind and utilize high-tech materializers. Hammering metal by hand is completely impractical when working at the scale of mechs. Mr. Dunnerholm on the other hand tries to do that as much as possible, so hammers are much more intertwined with his profession and his work methods."

The entire experience not only changed Dunnerholm's life, but also taught a few lessons to Ves.

People possessed a remarkable relationship with tools. As humanity was a classical tool-using race, it was vitally important for the best craftsmen and makers to wield the best possible tools.

However, it was also important for different professionals to hold the right tools for the job. Ves created the Hammer of Brilliance in this form in order to form a strong connection to Vulcan, but it was not a form that was particularly conducive to mech design.

Only a blacksmith could use this tool to the best effect.

## Chapter 4699: Tool Ownership

Certain tools fit certain professionals better. Dunnerholm and the Hammer of Brilliance seemed like a match in heaven in that sense.

The right craftsman held the right tool.

Not only that, but a deeply faithful dwarf finally made contact with the deity he idolized and looked up to all his life!

The combination between the two caused the master blacksmith to develop such a powerful connection with the hammer and Vulcan that they practically began to resonate to a subtle but surprisingly strong degree!

It reminded Ves a lot of the confluence between a mech pilot, a mech and a design spirit!

Dunnerholm looked eager to see what these new changes had wrought. He turned around and approached the statue of Vulcan that he had nearly finished and struck it with a powerful blow from the flat side of the hammer!

The spiritually-infused strike seemed to flip an invisible switch inside the metal statue, causing its spiritual foundation to straighten itself and complete itself in a way that Dunnerholm could never accomplish by himself!

The substantial improvements to the intangible qualities of the totem caused it to develop a considerably stronger and more stable connection to Vulcan.

This allowed the object to strengthen its glow until it came close to matching the capabilities of a genuine totem produced by Ves!

"Remarkable!"

Both Ves and Samandra looked amazed at how Dunnerholm utilized a single hammer strike to fulfill the ambitious goal of the Creation Association!

Ves stepped closer, and so did Samandra. Both of them shifted their attention to the totem that still exhibited a few rough spots but had already reached a much more advanced state than any other totem made in the Creation Association's headquarters!

As Ves reached out with his palm and touched the cool metal surface of the statue that closely mirrored his form in a grander and more ostentatious outfit, he could feel the pure craftsmanship and effort put into this work.

It was not just a metal statue. It was the product that Dunnerholm carefully designed and put together by combining different aspects of his own philosophy and sophisticated methods.

Different from Ves who not only liked to be a little chaotic but also celebrated the birth of life, Rogha Dunnerholm followed a variation of the typical Vulcanite mindset that the best products needed to be heavy, solid and as unbreakable as possible.

This was already apparent from the moment Ves stepped into this private workshop. The statue's contours and design elements veered away from looking delicate and instead conveyed a greater sense of mass and solidness.

The hammer strike completed the work that Dunnerholm really wanted to make but could not do so due to his spiritual deficiency.

For all of the blacksmith's deep and extensive mastery of his craft, he could only fully work the material side of his products. He had never gained the capability to shape and forge their immaterial qualities in the past, and this shortcoming had become a lot more apparent once he joined the Creation Association and received a mission to replicate Ves' totems.

All of that changed now that he gained a tool that largely filled the gap. It was as if Dunnerholm suddenly gained a solution to the problem that he could have never solved unless he was able to deepen and strengthen his faith to a ridiculous degree!

As Ves studied and touched the improved totem from multiple directions, he gained a better and more detailed sense of Dunnerholm as a craftsman.

Although he looked and acted like a stereotypical dwarven blacksmith, he developed his own notions on how to make his products.

The clearest trait that belonged to the dwarf was the interesting integration of harmonics into the man's work.

Ves had already noticed it on a subconscious level when Dunnerholm struck the Hammer of Brilliance against the surface of the totem.

It was not a coincidence that the dwarf chose to strike a particular point with a precise amount of force!

To test whether Ves had made the right conclusion, he reached out and banged the statue on the exact same spot with his fist.

A softer and more dampened sound echoed from the strike, but it was a sound that came across as much more pleasant and musical than normal!

Ves looked at Dunnerholm with a bit of astonishment. "I never expected you to try to turn your heavy and massive objects into musical instruments that can produce beautiful tones. It is hard to tie the two together."

The master blacksmith smirked as if he had encountered this reaction a thousand times before.

"I like the challenge. Besides, there has always been a dichotomy between function and form, utility and frivolity as well as practicality and beauty. Playing with harmonics and imbuing all of my products with a measure of acoustic beauty and harmony is my method of transforming seemingly useless decorations and cosmetic elements into useful and practical additions to an otherwise functional work."

That was an interesting design philosophy and motivation. Ves understood the angle that the dwarven blacksmith was coming from and respected the man for pursuing this odd but challenging design philosophy in his smithing work.

His specialization also happened to complement his current situation.

This was because Rogha Dunnerholm worked on harmonics for such a long time that he was partially able to translate his expertise on acoustic resonance into other, more esoteric forms of resonance!

That was why he was able to achieve the greatest success in reproducing totems out of all of the craftsmen employed by the Creation Association.

It was also how he was able to utilize the Hammer of Brilliance in a new and successful manner at the start!

Inevitably, Dunnerholm asked the question that Ves already anticipated.

"I know I have no right to hold or use this sacred hammer, but... can I borrow it from you?" The dwarf asked in a surprisingly meek and pleading tone. It was as if the hammer was his only lifeline! "I can create much better works on your Creation Association's behalf as long as I wield this tool. Even a single day is enough for me to complete a work that I can be proud of for the rest of my career!"

Ves immediately shook his head. "I am afraid I will have to take it back, Mr. Dunnerholm."

This caused the blacksmith to become crushed.

It was hard to let go of a good thing once it fell into his hands. Losing possession of it so soon after holding it for a short time might turn into a trauma that would haunt him for the rest of his life. It may have been better if he hadn't been introduced to the Hammer of Brilliance in the first place!

"Why take it back, sir?" Director Samandra Avikon asked with a puzzled frown. "Look at the result. Dunnerholm and possibly our other master craftsmen can produce great works with this sacred tool. I can personally guarantee you that our organization will do our utmost to safeguard it for as long as you have entrusted it to us. You can even assign additional protectors from the Larkinson Army and the Black Cats to increase our security if you are not satisfied with our current arrangements."

Ves shook his head. "That is not the issue, director. The reason why I want to take the hammer back is because it is mine. Simple as that. Do you understand, Mr. Dunnerholm?"

The dwarf lowered his head. "I do."

"I do not understand." The sole woman in the room said.

"You should explain it to her, Dunnerholm."

The older man nodded and turned to his nominal superior. "This hammer, although great beyond any measure that I can put into words, is ultimately not a tool designed to be used by my own hands. You see, when craftsmen initially start out in their line of profession, they begin with making use of the tools they can acquire or are made available to us. This can go on for a long time without issue. It is only until they have reached a certain stage of their mastery that it becomes more difficult to create the objects that they have imagined due to increasing limitations."

"One of them is the increasingly obvious lack of fit between users and their tools." Ves remarked.

"Exactly, sir. We have trained in the use of standardized tools for many years. This is fine if we want to keep producing plain goods without any deviations from the norm, but master craftsmen cannot fully exert their distinct strengths anymore. There is never a case where one size fits all. The higher the requirements, the more that differences like these make a crucial difference. As much as I value this precious hammer, if I force myself to make use of it, I will either lose my way or waste this heirloom's potential, because it was made with a different purpose and user in mind."

"Is the problem that serious?"

"It is, ma'am. I would ultimately not be able to make use of it as it was intended to be used, and that is one of the greatest insults an artisan can direct towards a tool. Aside from that, it would ultimately do more harm than good to me to use it. This hammer is too powerful for my own good. By becoming dependent on its potent qualities, I will devolve from a craftsman to a slave to the instrument. I cannot let this happen."

Though Samandra still didn't fully understand this mindset due to the fact that she was not a maker herself, she recognized how the beliefs of both Ves and Dunnerholm on this topic had become a matter of principle.

"Very well."

The dwarf reluctantly handed the Hammer of Brilliance back to its rightful owner, who simply attached it back to his toolbelt.

Ves wasn't done, however.

"I think there is a better alternative to allowing Mr. Dunnerholm here to use the Hammer of Brilliance in his own work. Rather than take the crooked path, we should follow the correct route."

This certainly caught the dwarven blacksmith's attention!

"Do you mean..."

Ves waved his hand across the workshop. "We have all of the tools and facilities we need to handmade a set of exquisite tools that we can design and make for your exclusive use. Your immense expertise in blacksmithing combined with a touch of help from my own expertise should allow us to solve your need in the right manner. What do you say?"

"I would be honored if you would assist me in creating a set of tools that are much more attuned to my current work!"

Director Samandra Avikon stood forgotten as the two craftsmen spontaneously started to work together despite the tension that existed between them earlier.

It seemed that Rogha Dunnerholm completely threw aside his mixed and complex feelings towards Ves and what happened to the Vulcan Empire in favor of this new initiative.

What the two were working on was exciting beyond measure to the dwarven blacksmith!

Two completely different people seamlessly and harmoniously started to discuss the design of a new set of hand tools.

Due to lack of time and other constraints, Ves could not help the dwarf make a complete set of customized blacksmith tools and machines.

However, it was already good enough if Dunnerholm obtained a few different hammer types as well as a set of other small specialized tools that could quickly be designed and made by hand.



It would be up to the dwarf himself to complete his collection of new tools with the ones that he made in cooperation with Ves.

As the two began to go in depth, neither of them experienced any friction or other problems related to their diverging professions.

Both of them not only possessed an extensive technical background, but Ves could constantly draw from Vulcan's expertise to fill up his own shortcomings.

In fact, as Rogha Dunnerholm and many other professionals like him prayed to Vulcan, the design spirit obtained an extensive understanding of blacksmithing and related crafts!

All of that allowed Ves to contribute much more than Dunnerholm expected. This not only accelerated their collaborative efforts, but also helped with elevating their work to a more remarkable height!

"These tools will become unique and unrivaled!" Ves exclaimed as both he and the dwarf became caught in a shared frenzy.

The workshop became filled with creative energies as both craftsmen let their imaginations run wild. They came up with so many new ideas that the tools they were working on exceeded their original limitations. They had become so much more in the designs!

## **Chapter 4700: Ves the Tool**

While Ves completely set aside every other consideration and joined forces with the Vulcanite he had just met to create a fantastic set of hand tools, his family briefly descended to the underground floor to check up on the distracted father.

Gloriana placed her hands on her hips. "Not this again. Can you set aside your stupid diversions and distractions for once in your life? We are your family, you know! This was supposed to be a day out for the kids!"

Ves did not even register her arrival. He had entered into such an intensive state of concentration that he only had one purpose in mind!

His children were already accustomed to this behavior from their father. They did not see it in a bad light. They differed from their mother in that sense.

"Papa always makes the best toys if he is really into it." Andraste said as she held a hammer toy sold by the gift shop of the Enlightened Church of Vulcan. "He's so strong when he is working so hard to make something."

Her older sister Aurelia nodded in agreement. "He is doing important work for the Creation Association. I know that whatever he is trying to do is for the good of all of us. He wouldn't be so engaged if he was working on a smaller job."

"Miaow." Clixie responded as she lay in Aurelia's arm.

Little Marvaine meanwhile had become distracted by all of the totems lying around in the workshop.

"Wow! This looks just like papa!"

The little boy stopped before the metal statue of Vulcan and touched it from different directions.

When he experimentally knocked against a leg, a soft but pleasant tone sounded from the totem!

"Wha?"

The boy began to pat and knock the statue at multiple different points. Each time he did so, the totem released a distinctive metallic tone that made it sound as if Marvaine was hitting random notes on an instrument!

"Hey, let me try!" Andraste insisted as she started to use her slightly larger and stronger arms to knock at the totem of Vulcan in his human guise!

The more rapid impacts caused the statue to generate a larger string of random sounds.

Though there should definitely be a way to skillfully play the totem like a musical instrument, neither Andraste nor Marvaine possessed any ability to play a song!

Still, just making a lot of random but tuned sounds was interesting enough for the kids!

"Hihihii!"

"I'm a musician!"

The children fooled around a bit more until they finally became too tired and pained to abuse the totem any further.

"Come, children." Gloriana called as she turned towards the exit. "Let us leave your absent father to his devices. We have a shopping spree to complete."

"Yay!"

"I want to eat chocolate!"

As the family left the workshop, Ves and Dunnerholm continued to finalize the design of the new set of tools.

After an hour of frantic exchanges and design work, they managed to finalize the design of over half a dozen different hammers and other instruments.

They managed to limit the amount of time they spent on this endeavor because Dunnerholm started out with the designs of his existing set of handmade tools.

There was no need to start from scratch as the master blacksmith's current set was already attuned to his hands and his personal style.

What they needed to do was to modify the tools so that they became more specialized towards the creation of totems and potentially other extraordinary products.

As they had figured out moments earlier, the main reason why Master Dunnerholm couldn't effectively make totems was because he did not possess any significant spirituality.

Although he was able to rely on his strong and unwavering faith in Vulcan as an alternative solution, his ability to channel Vulcan was too limited if the dwarf relied completely on his own inherent capabilities.

This was why there was a need to create a set of special tools that were especially attuned to Vulcan. They would be akin to the relic equipment that Ves had made in the past such as the Banner of Vulcan and the Imperial Crown currently held by the Iron Emperor.

His prior experiences with making those exceptional relics along with the expertise derived from Vulcan allowed Ves to implement a number of small but novel improvements that should strengthen the final results.

What he found interesting was working to see if he could empower or complement Rogha Dunnerholm's harmonic specialization.

The common ground that existed between acoustic resonance and more metaphysical forms of resonance gave Ves a few interesting ideas.

If he was able to combine or meld the two so that generating one form of resonance also produced another form of resonance, then he could make it a lot easier for the master blacksmith to imbue his products with extra qualities!

"This is it." Ves eventually said as he checked the completed designs for the last time. "If you are fine with this, we should proceed with fabricating the tools."

The dwarf hesitantly nodded. "I agree, but I still have my reservations about some of the material choices that you have made. I am not as familiar with working with first-class materials. They are not only harder, tougher and more difficult to process, their inherently stronger energetic properties can also produce adverse side effects when combined with other specific materials."

Ves did not look concerned. "I have already ordered my men to transfer a batch of high-end tools from the Cat Nest that will allow us to work on the toughest materials without taking a lot of time to process them. While we wait for the tools to be delivered, I can pass documentation to you that will quickly allow you to familiarize yourself with the properties of each first-class material."

The clan had already analyzed the properties of most of the materials salvaged by the Golden Skull Alliance in the previous battle. There should be no unexpected surprises as long as Ves and Dunnerholm got up to speed with the latest findings.

It did not take long for the shipment to arrive. Once a number of bots delivered the tools and crates of different high-end materials, Ves and Dunnerholm quickly set everything up and were on the cusp of starting their work.

"Wait a moment." Ves said as he raised his palm. "There are two possible actions that I can perform that can help us do a better job."

"What is it, sir?" Dunnerholm asked.

For a moment, Ves was considering whether he should take out his Hammer of Brilliance again so that he could give the dwarf a good whack on his head.

He quickly ruled out this option as he felt this wasn't the time. It may be better to wait Dunnerholm worked on a project that wasn't rushed and when the end product was much more significant to the Larkinson Clan.

Right now, they were only working on a set of tools.

Sure, they were vitally important to a master blacksmith, but did not directly radiate any further.

Ves would rather wait until Rogha Dunnerholm familiarized himself more with Vulcan's power and creating totems together with the design spirit before trying to make a truly powerful work!

Instead of using his special hammer, Ves would much rather resort to another enhancement.

"Blinky, it's time to shine."

Mrow.

A purple companion spirit emerged from Ves' head, eliciting a small grunt of surprise from the older dwarf.

Blinky possessed a special charm. The fluffy spiritual cat's fur streaked with the passing of points of lights that looked akin to shooting stars. The small diamond-like gem embedded on his forehead glowed with accumulated Worclaw energy.

"Is every mech designer capable of pulling a cat out of their nogging?"

"Only a couple. It's an invention of my own creation. I only bestowed this gift to a few trusted friends of mine."

"Can I ask how I can get a mind pet of my own?" Dunnerholm asked. "Preferably not in the form of a cat. I prefer to spend my time with dogs instead. They are much more loyal and obedient."

"I am sorry, but one of the requirements to obtain a companion spirit is to be gifted in a metaphysical sense. Only a small proportion of people satisfy this requirement."

What Ves didn't mention was that he was working on possible ways to bestow spiritual potential and boost the growth of spirituality through various means.

Fortunately, the dwarf didn't dwell over this issue. "Oh well. I have been doing well enough on my own. Please proceed, sir."

"Very well. You will probably encounter a few surprises, but try your best to refrain from resisting. The more you ease into this new experience, the more our work will benefit from our cooperation."

As soon as Blinky started to extend his spiritual connections and form a small design network, both Ves and Dunnerholm began to feel each other's emotions and gain more insights in each other's thoughts!

This was already a familiar experience to Ves, but Dunnerholm was absolutely floored!

At first, he showed a lot of guardedness and hesitation, but when the dwarf noticed that the patriarch maintained a friendly and inviting posture, Dunnerholm slowly started to embrace this incredibly useful state!

Neither of them spoke with each other as they already knew what their partners were thinking about.

Both of them started to share their thoughts on their collaboration work and their views on dwarves, Vulcan and other related subjects.

Ves would have never been willing to establish a design network if he didn't already prime Dunnerholm for its use.

When Ves deliberately leaked a few hints to Dunnerholm through the design network, the dwarf gradually widened his eyes.

There was a particular secret about Ves. His connection to Vulcan was a lot more special than most people thought!

Though Ves did not outright scream that he outright created Vulcan by combining a number of different ingredients, a part of which came from murdered dwarves, the two definitely shared a strong and permanent connection!

"Are you... a descendant of Vulcan?" Dunnerholm asked as he couldn't withhold his burning curiosity.

Ves honestly shook his head. "Nothing of the sort. I would rather not go into any further detail. Let us focus on our work instead of unrelated distractions."

There was no way that Ves would be able to explain the full story to a dwarf who lived in the Vulcan Empire for a long time.

From time travel shenanigans to vindictively creating Vulcan as a tool to engineer the downfall of the empire founded in his name, Dunnerholm would either snap and go crazy or become consumed by rage!

The lack of answers frustrated Dunnerholm, but he was enough of a professional to set aside his doubts and questions and focus on the task at hand.

It took a while for the dwarf to get accustomed with the new variables introduced by Blinky's design network, but soon he started to understand the benefits of forming a direct mental connection with another creator.

They not only synced up to a much better degree, but also understood each other's work and design philosophies from a first-hand perspective.

Producing the tools was much different from what Ves was accustomed to in his usual design projects.

Instead of making use of advanced tools and powerful superfabs, Dunnerholm wanted to go old school and resort to traditional forging.

Ves knew that Ketis loved to make her handmade swords in this way, and she possessed a lot more proficiency in this craft than himself.

Sure, he could borrow Vulcan's acquired expertise in order to get by, but this was ultimately borrowed knowledge. It did not truly belong to him and he would never be able to replicate the work of other smiths to the same degree.

Fortunately, Ves didn't have to perform any of the most demanding technical processes. A master blacksmith could do a much better job than any mech designer as far as forging was concerned!

That said, he could still assist with completing the less important steps such as preparation, inspection, finishing, polishing and other essential but fairly simple tasks.

He could also make full play of his artistic sense to decorate and embellish the tools so that their appearance matched their symbolic meaning.

The two cooperated as smoothly as if they had already worked alongside each other for several years!

Under the blessing of Vulcan's glow and possibly his chosen agent, Dunnerholm worked harder and more earnestly than he had done in many years!