

Chapter 1171 The Clie

Ves entered a large, opulent office with high, vaulted ceilings.

As the owner of an imposing office himself, he appreciated the way they raised the stature of the occupant and manipulated the moods of those who entered.

The interior design of Madame Cecily's office blended modernity with tradition. It contained the usual baroque touches, but it incorporated it in a cleaner manner.

The best way to describe was that the interior blended both Ylvainan and Brighter elements to present a future vision of what the Protectorate could become.

The office managed to convey this message without using any words.

No matter how many modern touches the interior contained, the large carved relief of Prophet Ylvaine behind Madame Cecily's desk served to anchor the occupant's devotion to the faith. It was a lively piece of work, and although Ves could tell it had been shaped by a bot, the artist who designed it used his own skills to form its design.

The more Ves engaged in the artistic side of mech design, the more he appreciated the works of other artists. No matter if it was a mech, a sculpture or a structure, each design profession shared something in common, which was to communicate via art.

After taking in the office, Ves slowly stepped forward. His formal shoes mutedly echoed against the hard tiles of the floor. Behind the large desk at the far end of the office, a large swiveling office chair faced its back at him. A smooth arm extended from one side the chair.

Its occupant appeared to be studying the large, elevated, life-sized sculpture of Prophet Ylvaine set into the wall. Ves had to admit that if his own office possessed a feature like that, he could stare at it for hours and appreciate every little nuance the artist conveyed in portraying the founder of the Ylvainan Faith.

As Ves reached the front of the desk, he mentally scratched his head at the lack of response so far. Was Madame Cecily making a power play?

He decided to be direct, if only to stave off the awkward silence that threatened to ensue.

"Madame Cecily Curin, I presume?"

The slim, smooth arm resting on the left armrest of the chair tapped a single finger against the surface. That seemed to activate a command that turned the high windows opaque and turned on an interference field.

"I am Ves Larkinson, a de facto Journeyman Mech Designer from the Bright Republic. You invited me here to fulfill a private commission."

"You're finally here. Good." A confident feminine voice spoke. "It has been a long time since I last saw you. Have you already forgotten about little old me?"

The office chair swiveled to face Ves, revealing someone who looked very different from the images of Madame Cecily Curin he studied beforehand!

Ves immediately recognized the voice and appearance of the woman who faced him now.

"Calabast!"

"In the flesh."

"Y-You! Where is Madame Cecily?"

Calabast pressed her hands together and grinned. "Haven't you already figured it out? I am Madame Cecily."

"Yeah right." Ves responded with skepticism. "I don't know who you really are or who you work for, but there's not a single drop of piety in you. If you're an Ylvainan, then I am a CFA officer!"

"I'm glad you aren't taking my word at face value. Such caution is vitally important if you wish to keep your identity as a Holy Son a secret."

The mention of that unwanted identity displeased Ves immensely. "Why are you here? Why am I here? Is the commission you presented to the LMC even real?"

"Oh, it's real, have no fear. You still have work to do in the Protectorate, but let's discuss that later. First, I want you to calm down and take a seat."

"How the hell can I calm down when you've come back to haunt me?!" Ves burst out. He swept his palm at her. "Every time I've met you, I've suffered for it! You're my least favorite person in the galaxy!"

"Sit. Down. Ves."

Ves glared at Calabast, making no attempt to his his contempt for her. Nonetheless, he did as told and sat down on the padded chair in front of the desk.

Both of them knew that Calabast wouldn't meet with Ves unless she held all the cards in her hands. It was completely useless for Ves to throw a fit or pull out the Amastendira and shoot her in her smug face. All of those radical actions led to worse outcomes than just sitting down to listen to what she had to say.

That didn't mean that Ves liked to be forced into playing along.

"I've been following your progress since your return to the Bright Republic." Calabast began in an amiable voice. "I see you've done a lot of good for yourself. Not only have you ingratiated yourself in one of the local power structures, you've also made brisk strides in advancing your core competencies. The Metal Scroll, the power that has granted you the status of Holy Son, must have aided you in becoming a better mech designer, right?"

"I don't possess this Metal Scroll thing." Ves said truthfully.

Calabast snorted. "Don't try to play word games in front of me. Whether you regard your secret weapon as a Metal Scroll or something else, it's clear that you possess something remarkable that used to belong to the Five Scrolls Compact. Your entire career trajectory up until now is a giant collection of anomalies. While exceptions always pop up among mech designers, your progress is far too fast. An external aid that accelerated your progress is the most likely explanation that fits, especially if you consider that the Holy Scrolls have always served as carriers of knowledge."

She did her homework, alright. Ves felt completely exposed in front of her gaze!

The only consolation was that Calabast likely didn't know the exact details of what advantages he possessed. Ves extended his Spirituality and determined that Calabast did not possess any notable strength in this regard.

He even felt tempted to jerk her around a little bit by employing his Spirituality, but he quickly dropped the idea.

The effect would be limited due to the fact that her own spirit was intangible and difficult to interact with. Also, someone as vigilant and in control as Calabast would immediately detect something amiss.

"What do you want?" Ves asked, deliberately avoiding saying anything about her conjectures.

Unfortunately, Ves seemed to have sent some unspoken signal, because Calabast grinned wider. "You consider me as a threat right now, right?"

"You're a menace since I first met you back in the Harkensen system. That hasn't changed."

"Why?"

"Isn't that obvious?"

"Tell me, then."

"You're a spy. You work for some powerful organization or state. You know my secret."

"Correct." Calabast nodded in satisfaction. "Now tell me, Ves, where in that list states that I have to be your enemy?"

Ves fell silent for a moment. "In my personal experience, spies are shady as hell and are always ready to stab someone in the back."

As if to taunt him, Calabast drew out a slim dagger from a hidden holster from her wrist. She flourished it around her fingers, making it dance.

"Considering your interactions with one of the Bright Republic's intelligence agencies, I can see why you think of us that way. Trust is hard to come by in our circles, but not even spies can operate without some measure of it. I won't ask you to trust me yet, Ves, but I hope we can at least see eye to eye on each other based on mutual benefit."

This wasn't the first time she mentioned something like this. Ves frowned.

"Mutual benefit? You mean you want to blackmail me so that you can squeeze me of all the possible benefits I can provide to you and your shadowy employers."

"I don't work for anyone anymore. Not directly, at least. After my last mission, I earned enough merit to hang up my field agent hat. For all intents and

purposes, I am acting on my own right now. I haven't shared your secret to anyone, Ves. In fact, I even cleaned up some of the dirty tracks that you've left behind."

"What do you mean by that?" Ves asked with eyes narrowed in suspicion.

"For someone who carries the identity of a Holy Son of one of the most notorious terrorist organizations in human space, you sure don't know how close you came to exposing yourself. Why do you think the CFA hasn't taken you into custody? Why do you think the Five Scrolls Compact hasn't registered your existence yet? Do you think you can just accelerate your career without drawing heaps of investigation behind the scenes?"

Ves looked at Calabast as if he was a fish out of water.

"Uhh.."

"I think that sums up the amount of thought you put into covering your back. I admire your ability to design mechs. You're a genius when it comes to working with mechs. Yet it seems the Metal Scroll can only improve your abilities related to this narrow field. Spies like me can still run rings around you without ever tripping your alarms."

Ves took the rebuke seriously. Even so, he didn't like it when Calabast talked down on him. "I'm a mech designer. I've been focused on improving my ability to design mechs for years."

"There's nothing wrong with that. As you say, you are a mech designer, so it is a given that you are focused on your primary job. All I am trying to say here is that your singular focus on this area is not enough to preserve your freedom and your life. What is the use of becoming a great mech designer when the Five Scrolls Compact eventually knocks at your door?"

"I'll just run or something. The galaxy is big. There's no way they can find a tiny needle in a galaxy-sized haystack."

"Just like your parents? Is that what you want? To live the life of a fugitive?"

Mentioning his parents was a sore spot to Ves. "What are you suggesting, then?"

"I'm glad you asked that question! It ties into what I want!" Calabast grinned and excitedly cracked her knuckles. "The way I see it, you're a dummy, but a dummy with one of the most precious possessions on the galaxy. I don't think you even realize the full import and history of the Metal Scroll. The Holy Scrolls used to elevate humanity from a weak and short-lived race into a galactic hegemon! Now that one of the Scrolls fell into your possession, you can elevate yourself to the same heights!"

Ves would be lying if he said he never entertained such delusions before. If the Mech Designer System continued to assist in his progression, it wasn't impossible for him to advance to Master or even Star Designer within his lifetime!

"Yet the ad hoc manner in which you are handling your affairs makes it clear to me that you haven't adopted any coherent strategy to manage your rise!" Calabast admonished him. "It's clear to me that if you are left alone, you'll slip up sooner or later and squander your opportunities!"

"So what is your point?"

The woman leaned back on her chair and patted her chest. "My point is that you need a reliable, trustworthy partner who can deal with some of the latent threats in your way. Fortunately for you, I'm willing to be that partner."

A short silence ensued as Ves stared at Calabast with incredulity.

"Trustworthy? Reliable? I don't think you know the meaning of those words."

She laughed. "Oh, come now, Ves! I'm one of the few people who found out your secret, but have I ever run off to the MTA or CFA to earn a sumptuous reward? I haven't! Because you know why? I know that any reward that the

Big Two can give me will never match my gains if I partner with someone as promising as you! Don't you get it, Ves? I benefit more from this arrangement than any other choices I can make with the information at hand!"

"So it's all about mutual benefit!"

"Exactly, Ves! I don't want to take away your secret! I'm not a mech designer in the first place so I wouldn't know what to do with it. As for handing it to others, do you think I'm stupid? I highly prefer to work with a known quantity like you. Each of us stand to benefit from each other's help, and this will be the foundation of our partnership going forward!"

"Because I'm a dummy, right? It helps you retain control." Ves sardonically remarked.

Calabast threw a knowing smile at him. "I'm glad you recognize the truth. So what do you think of my proposal? Are you willing to let me ride on your transit shuttle? I can pay the fee."

"Is it even possible for me to reject your generous proposal?"

"Frankly, no. I'm just giving you the illusion of choice."

Chapter 1172 Pursuing Greatness

"Why?"

"Why what, Ves?"

"Why bother with this charade of a partnership?"

"Do you think I'm insincere?"

"It's very hard for me to trust you. Spies like you tend to say one thing only to mean something else entirely."

Calabast nonchalantly shrugged. "Like I said. It benefits me more if I get to ride on your shuttle than to report you to the authorities. I don't want to blackmail you or exploit you, Ves. That's a short-sighted approach that will

only lead to further animosity between us. You're small and weak right now, but how long will that last with the Metal Scroll at your disposal? Eventually, you'll grow up to become a formidable mech designer with a lot of sway who can easily turn the tables on me. Even if I'm careful and employed a lot of safeguards, it only takes one mistake for me to slip up."

"So you just expect me to smile and nod while you are butting into my business?"

"I know it irks you a lot to work with me, set aside your emotions for a moment." Calabast sighed and shook her head. "A secret like yours is extremely desirable by even the mightiest powers in human space. With the way you've been meandering through your life so far, the risk of exposing your secret to one of them is greater than you think. While I can't promise to take care of every problem, I can help you deflect unwanted attention so that you will have the time to grow."

As a businessman, Ves understood her rationale. He just didn't want to acknowledge it. Partnering up with Calabast left a foul taste in his mouth.

Nonetheless, he knew that she was right in her consideration. The other solutions at her disposal were either too risky or didn't pay off very much. Rather than handle the hot potato herself or hand it over to the Big Two, why not invest in its existing owner and strike up a genuine partnership?

"What's in it for you?" Ves asked. "Money? Power?"

"That, and more, Ves. You are thinking too narrowly. Think of what you will become in a century or two. Will you still be a mech designer whose reach only extends to a single star sector? I think not! Your high rate of progression will inevitably propel you to greater heights! The Komodo Star Sector will become nothing in your eyes! Perhaps you'll even relocate to the galactic

heartland or the galactic center and become involved in the highest echelons of power! And when you do, I hope I can tag along!"

In Calabast's eyes, Ves was like a transit shuttle slowly rising up to the heavens. Right now, the shuttle was flying low enough for her to climb onboard. As long as she behaved and helped the shuttle reach its destination, she stood to gain just as much as Ves in the long term!

"So you want to achieve greatness through my help?"

"Isn't that what anyone wants?" Calabast smiled. "Even I am no exception. While I may enjoy a more fortunate upbringing than others, I'm still a nobody on the galactic stage. Even if I work as hard as I can, the most I can achieve is becoming a side leader in the Komodo Star Sector. I can forget about rising any higher than that through my own capabilities. Only by partnering up with you will I be able to break through the limitations of my station and rise to greater heights!"

Ves felt that Calabast was largely sincere just now. Ambition sparkled in her eyes as she spoke of rising above the muck who were stuck in their star sectors for their entire lives.

The prospect of riding Ves' shuttle to the galactic center was an irresistible attraction to anyone who lived in the backwaters of human space.

As for Ves, his fascination towards the more developed parts of the galaxy had waned ever since he returned from his latest Mastery experience. While living and working in the Terran Confederation was great, it wasn't the paradise he previously imagined.

Living at the edge of the galaxy could be just as meaningful as living at the very center of it. Although Ves suspected that Calabast hadn't revealed all of her ambitions, he believed what she just said. Who wouldn't want to become a player instead of a chess piece?

He still didn't like it, though.

"What are you offering in return for this supposed partnership?" Ves asked.

"I'm not going to sit back and ride on your coattails, Ves. You need a confidante who can help you achieve greatness. Do you think you can just take advantage of the Metal Scroll and gradually climb to the top in your profession?"

"What's wrong with that?"

"It's too slow!" Calabast shook her head. "What's the difference between leading a normal life and what you are doing now?"

"You just said that I shouldn't be making waves and expose my existence!"

"There's nothing wrong with that as long as the status quo holds. The problem is that it is not a given that peace will last! If you have seen the signs like I have, a time of upheaval might soon be upon us. The current order that enforces peace in our region of space may no longer be there! Anything can happen between now and a hundred years. If you think that the Age of Mechs is a peaceful age, then think again!"

"You know something about the future?"

"Just some hints and suspicions, nothing too solid." Calabast shook her head.

"For example, the existence of Sigrund alone is a major threat to human civilization. However, I've performed some research on AIs and figured out that it won't be easy for him to rid himself of the safeguards the CFA hardcoded into his processor core. As long as those safeguards exist, he won't be able to transcend his existence beyond the boundaries of his processor core. That means he won't be able to act as an immortal and omnipotent virtual god on the galactic net."

Ves was always wondering about Sigrund. "So the hybrid AI is laying low while he deals with this problem?"

"That's the most likely explanation. While I may be wrong, we'll just have to deal with it if Sigrund breaks the accord. For now, all three of us benefit more if we all keep our mouths shut on each other."

All three of them entered into pacts of silence with each other. The only difference now was that Calabast wanted to upgrade her accord with Ves into a full-blown partnership.

Though Ves still felt awful about letting Calabast interfere with his life, the underlying logic was very sound.

Hadn't he wanted to recruit a trustworthy spy to head his shadow force? While Calabast wouldn't be occupying the exact same position, her role covered most of the areas which Ves found lacking.

Calabast happen to fall into the category of 'trustworthy' spy. She was trustworthy in that she knew his greatest secret but he could count on her to work with him instead of snitching him out to others.

"I always wanted to recruit a spy to raise a hidden shadow force."

"I can help you set something like that up, but not at this time." Calabast replied in an easy manner. "For now, it doesn't make sense for a newly-ascended Journeyman to become involved in my sphere. That will change as you grow in power and influence, but that will take decades at the very least. For now, the assistance I can provide from remote should be sufficient for your needs."

"If you can't help me with that, then what use are you to me right now?"

Calabast swept her arm over her office. "Haven't you forgotten about my identity here? I am both the Calabast you know and Madame Cecily Curin! My

second identity allows me to wield a considerable amount of authority over the Protectorate's mech market. Ever since I returned from my mission, I've thought of many possible ways to assist your growth. I've given up a lot of opportunities in order to assume this identity. This is the best way for me to help you expand your company."

Ves crossed his arms. "Why the Protectorate of all places? Why didn't you infiltrate the Ministry of Economic Development?"

"It's not that easy for me to influence your company's development in your home state." She shook her head. "The Bright Republic's mech market is very competitive and the state isn't inclined to interfere too often. Any attempts of abusing my position of power within a government institution will quickly be noticed by the local factions. Their existence has also made it so that power is divided over a large amount of government institutions. This way, no single faction will ever be able to wield enough power to eliminate the others."

"I see. The Protectorate is different. It's largely a closed economy so the domestic mech market isn't nearly as competitive. Power is concentrated in the hands of just three leading dynasties, each of which concentrate a lot of their power in their respective priorities. A director working for the Ministry of Trade and Industry in the Protectorate is a lot more influential than a director working for the Ministry of Economic Development back at home."

"It also helps that I conveniently made use of a backdoor to assume this identity. Madame Cecily did not exist before I arrived at the Protectorate. Now that I am here, my cover identity is fully established."

"Does that mean the Curin Dynasty will back all of your decisions?"

"It's not that simple." Calabast shook her head. "I'm sure you've already heard about it, but the Protectorate is a very divided state. Reformers and traditionalists are constantly at odds, and even though the former is taking the

lead, the latter won't be content to go down without a fight. In such a delicate period of time, the most I can do for you is open up some opportunities to increase your market presence in this state."

That didn't sound like a lot of help, but Ves knew that a lot of foreign mech designers would jump at the chance!

Still, Ves couldn't help but feel a little disappointed. Calabast promised big but couldn't offer him a lot of help at this stage.

"If this is the extent of the benefits I can expect from my partnership with you, I must say that I am feeling a bit underwhelmed."

"I can do more than lend you a hand in the Protectorate." She said. "I have only recently separated from my old employers, so I no longer have access to their intelligence network. It takes time to build up a network of assets and informers from scratch. You'll thank me in time once my network spans the entire star sector."

"That is still something in the future. Isn't there something you can do immediately?"

"I have already done more for you than you realize. Haven't I mentioned that I've covered some of your tracks? Anyone who studies your life will inevitably grow suspicious why you've risen so hard. I've employed a lot of resources to spread hundreds of different possible leads on the galactic net and in the entire star sector. Anyone who looks you up will be bombarded with evidence that you are a Terran plant, a Rubarthan plant, a bastard of a notable dignitary from the Friday Coalition, an abnormal half-alien talent from the frontier and etc."

Ves blinked at that. "Won't that make it obvious that I have something to hide?"

"That's not the extent of what I've done to obscure your traces. Right now, there's such a large cloud of uncertainty hovering over your head that it isn't worth it to mess with you. As long as you don't give anyone a strong reason to cross over that line, your secret will remain safe and secure. I will continue to cover your back on this front."

Perhaps Ves indeed neglected this area. "Thanks, I guess."

"You don't have to make it sound as if I'm your mother, Ves. We are equals in this partnership. You do your thing and I do my thing. Only when we combine our efforts will we be able to benefit the most."

The premise of this partnership lay in that Ves and Calabast each benefit more from working together than working alone. While Calabast employed some coercion to get him to accept the partnership, so far she largely meant well.

The question was if this relationship based on mutual benefit would last. Would she keep riding the transit shuttle or bail out at some point?

Chapter 1173 Second Home Marke

For some reason, the prominent sculpture of Prophet Ylvaine seemed highly incongruent in this setting. Calabast herself admitted that Madame Cecily was a fabricated identity that didn't exist before she infiltrated the Protectorate.

Now that she faced him from the other side of the desk, grinning like a certain mechanical cat who just devoured a huge lump of high-grade exotics, Ves simply could not equate her to a devout believer.

"What is it, Ves?" Calabast asked as she caught his skeptical expression.

"Is it difficult for you to maintain your cover identity here? What if you're found out? I doubt the Ylvainans will be pleased to have a nonbeliever in charge of such an important responsibility."

"Come now. Who do you think I am?" She chuckled. "That little fellow from Flashlight who recently joined your staff has nothing on me! Infiltrating a religious state like the Protectorate is not as difficult as you imagine. In time, you will realize that the Protectorate will play a very important role in the future. You'll thank me for being in the right position at the right time."

"Sure. I suppose you can't tell me anything?"

"I'm sorry. Some secrets are best left with me. For now, it's important for you to expand your presence in the Protectorate. Our goal is to make your mech company into one of the leading foreign enterprises involved in the local mech market."

Ves adopted a skeptical expression again. "I'm happy to see that happen, but is that even possible? The LMC is far from a dominant mech company in the Bright Republic, let alone in the rest of the star sector. It is a bit too much to expect for the LMC to take up a leading position in the Protectorate when companies like NORA Consolidated and other mech companies owned by Seniors can do a much better job."

"Ah, but that's the genius of it." She grinned. "The Ylvaine Protectorate recognizes the need to liberalize the mech market, but the opposition to it is very intense. The pressure exerted by the Ylvainan Journeymen and Seniors will make it so that the liberalization process will be slow and gradual. Any mech company that is led by a foreign Senior will be restricted from entering, while a smaller mech company led by a Journeyman like you will be able to slip through the cracks. Very few Ylvainans in the mech industry feel threatened by your presence."

Basically, with Calabast's help, the LMC stood to benefit from a first-mover advantage in the Protectorate mech market for a substantial amount of time.

"How much time are we talking about here?"

"Two or three decades. It's difficult to estimate that far ahead. In my judgement, as long as the Protectorate continues to pursue gradual liberalization, you can expect to enjoy that much time in which the Protectorate's mech market can serve as your playground. Every year, I'm expected to permit more foreign mech companies to enter the market without many restrictions, so don't think you have this place to yourself."

The local Ylvainan mech designers also wouldn't sit still and let the foreign mech designers take away their market share. Ves knew that Calabast couldn't push the local interest groups too far on this matter.

"I take it you can manipulate the foreign entrants into the market in my favor, right?"

"Right. I'm expected to allow a number of mech companies led by Apprentices or Journeyman entry into the market. Unlike the offer that I'm about to extend to you, your competitors won't enjoy unrestricted access. While they are allowed to export a much greater amount of mechs to the Protectorate than before, tariffs and other trade barriers will make them more expensive and less competitive to the other offerings in the market."

If Calabast kept her promises, then a mech designed by Ves that sold for 50 million credits would be for sale in the Protectorate for roughly the same price.

On the other hand, a competitor would still need to deal with a number of trade barriers that increased the cost and reduced the profit of every sale. A mech sold by a competitor needed to be priced at 55 to 65 million credits in order to earn the same amount of profit!

This was a massive competitive advantage to the LMC!

"So all I need to do to earn the right to earn the right to do unrestricted business with the Protectorate is to fulfill the commission, right?"

"Right. It's not a sham if that's what you're thinking of. My cover identity's power base isn't entirely secure. Not everyone in the Curin and the Kronon Dynasty agrees with opening up the economy, and I haven't even mentioned the Poxco Dynasty yet. Suffice to say, need a lot of protection if I want to remain in a position to help you. Ever since I left my old employers, I have to depend on myself for protection. It will be good if you can lend a hand."

"Do you really need my help?" Ves asked. "Surely the local mech designers won't resort to perverting the designs of your bodyguard mechs."

"No. In truth, I can import a decent mech from any foreign mech company if I don't trust any of our domestic mech companies. I just wanted to invite you here so that we can hit multiple birds with a single stone. By making you responsible for designing six of my bodyguard mechs, we can make multiple statements that advance our interests."

"One message would be that you don't trust or think you can rely on a bodyguard mech designed by a domestic mech designer." Ves mentioned.

"Correct. It's meant to be an indirect slap in the face of the Ylvainan mech industry that I turned to a foreigner instead of one of their own."

"I heard your bodyguard mech pilots all consist of members of the Kronon Family. Will they be agreeable to your choice of mechs?"

"They're good soldiers." Calabast dismissed the concern with a wave of her hand. "Regardless of their personal opinions, they'll follow orders. They will pilot a hollowed-out mech-sized cleaning bot if that is what is expected of them. The Protectors of the Faith is one of the least political institutions in the Ylvaine Protectorate. The Ylvainans learned the hard way that pairing fanatics and extremists with mechs is a recipe for disaster."

What she said made a lot of sense, but Ves reserved his own judgement.

"Can I meet the six mech pilots who will pilot the commissioned mechs in

person? It will help me a lot if I have a solid impression of the people who will actually make use of my products."

"Sure. I'll schedule a meeting for you with them tomorrow. Right now, they are housed in a training base not far from here. My new batch of guards are young mech pilots who graduated from the mech academies only recently. Please take that into account when you design your mech."

"I understand. However, do you really think it is a good idea to assign inexperienced mech pilots to hero mechs? Not everyone is suitable to pilot such a mech."

Calabast swiveled her chair to stare up at the sculpture of Prophet Ylvaine. "You and I need to impress the local mech designers. If you come up with a great hero mech design, we can impress them to such an extent that they won't raise any eyebrows when I give you unrestricted access to the local mech market."

"I can do that.. I think. Do you want my mechs to look fancy or do they have to be combat effective as well?"

"Both. From what I've gathered from your design style, you are capable of both, right? That will be very beneficial to you as you work in this state. Many Ylvainans have a penchant for elegant, artful-looking mechs. Your Blackbeak and the Crystal Lord received a modest amount of attention in some of the local mech circles. The only reason why your company didn't sell more of them is because your gold label mechs are far too difficult to obtain."

"What are your demands when it comes to their performance?"

"I'll leave that up to you. Aside from looking impressive, I want the new mechs to be able to fend off landbound but especially aerial threats."

"Is there anything else you want to add to your shopping list?"

"Yes. I want you to apply a religious theme to the mechs. Outwardly, the mechs have to come across as holy machines."

Ves looked pensive. "While I am confident in my artistic skills, I am not an expert in the Ylvainan Faith. How am I supposed to design a mech with this theme when I know nothing about this faith?"

"You don't have to work alone. Not every mech designer is against the reforms. I'll put you in touch of a couple of friendlier mech designers, though they aren't very high in rank. They should still be able to help you in this field."

"Thank you. From what I've already seen of Protectorate mechs, it's best to have a local on hand to help me shape the aesthetics of my mech."

Outward appearances didn't matter too much in the Bright Republic, but in the Protectorate many mech buyers expected a certain look to their designs.

"I think it'll take me a couple of months to finish the commission."

"I will put the best workshop I have access to at your disposal. If you are short on anything, feel free to inform me. I will make sure you are supplied with what you need as long as it falls within our budget. I can't spend an unlimited amount of money for this commission, so you need to make sure you design some efficient mechs."

"No problem. Can I have a full list of parameters that needs special attention?"

Calabast shook her head. "I'll prepare the list tonight. I don't have too many demands, though. Their ceremonial purpose comes first, but they should still be good enough to put up a fight."

After some poignant questions, Ves understood what Calabast wanted out of the commissioned mechs.

She wanted to intimidate the local mech designers. A hero mech that looked fantastic and performed decently would not have been anything special if

designed by a local. If they learned that a foreigner designed such a mech, they had no choice but to bear the implicit insult.

Keeping the local mech designers busy and worried allowed Ves enough room to establish himself in the Protectorate's mech market.

After Ves received all of the instructions of what Calabast expected of the mechs, he could begin to work whenever he wanted.

He still had one more question, though.

"Seeing that you are not entirely safe here, will I be in any trouble while I work here?"

Calabast nodded grimly. "Some of my problems might spill over to you. It's unavoidable. I trust in your survival abilities. A Holy Son shouldn't die so easily."

Ves wanted to groan. "I don't appreciate being exposed to any danger. Can't you just let me return home to the Bright Republic and finish my work at home?"

"Nope. You need to immerse yourself in the Ylvainan culture and way of life if you want to design mechs that appeal to Ylvainans. Running home will also weaken the statements that I intend to convey."

Those sounded like weak reasons to him. "Is that all?"

"For now, yes. If you are really concerned about your safety, then I can allow your own bodyguard mechs to accompany you on the surface of Kesseling VIII."

Ves trusted in the Avatars of Myth he brought along this trip. Currently, the mechs and mech pilots taking part in this mission were still stuck aboard the Greenfeather in high orbit.

Ves still felt as if there was more to the situation than Calabast revealed.

"Please tell it to me straight. Am I in serious threat while I'm here?"

"It depends."

"On what?"

"On whether you will be able to charm the local mech community."

Ves began to smile. "Is that all? I'll have you know that I'm an excellent charmer. I'll have the locals eating from the palm of my hand in no time!"

"I see that sarcasm suits you well."

Chapter 1174 Clashing Faiths

Religion formed one of the great divisions of human civilization. Belief in a transcendent existence or an unfathomable structure holding reality aloft provided a framework for humans to find meaning in their lives.

In fact, many of the other alien races that humanity contacted also exhibited beliefs.

The argument between believers and non-believers raged throughout the ages without any sign of consensus.

Fortunately, humanity's expansion in space lessened the pressure of conflict between the two sides. The galaxy was so big that everyone had a place to call their own. Older religions who could trace their origins from Old Earth ruled entire star sectors while newer religions traveled to the outskirts of human space and occupied an unclaimed star system.

In this way, secular states and religious states largely learned to live alongside each other. The rate of conflict between the two types of states wasn't any higher than usual.

If they did go to war, then the impetus for the conflict rarely revolved around clashing ideologies.

Since the founding of Bright Republic and the Ylvaine Protectorate, the two states never found any cause to go to war. The Bright Republic already had their hands full with the Vesia Kingdom, so they tried their best to placate their religious neighbor.

The Ylvainans isolated themselves after a traumatic flight from the galactic heartland. It took several centuries for them to process their crisis of faith and the loss of both their prophet and his entire dynasty.

By the time they were ready to look outwards again, tensions quickly rose with their neighboring Star Faith Collective.

Both of them were religious states, but both of them centered around radically different beliefs!

The Ylvainans possessed transcendent beliefs based around many scattered predictions spoken by Prophet Ylvaine.

The Star Worshippers literally worshipped stars as living, thinking deities. The larger, more energetic and more luminous the star, the more powerful the stellar god!

The conflict between them began to flare in recent times because the Star Worshippers began to eye some of the star systems claimed by the Protectorate. Those star systems possessed powerful singular, binary or even trinary stars!

It didn't help that their beliefs weren't compatible with each other. While the Ylvainans were rather vague and obtuse about the existence of higher powers, one of their core beliefs fundamentally clashed with the central belief of the Star Worshippers.

Prophet Ylvaine once stated that a time would come where every form of life would eventually transcend into immortal godlike beings!

Whether it was a human, alien, exobeast, plant or a virus, a time of ending would come one day where each living being ascended to godhood!

This pivotal prediction sparked a lot of tension between the Ylvainans and nearly everyone else, whether they were secular or religious!

The secularists vehemently disagreed with the Ylvainan inclination to encourage peace between humans and aliens. To an Ylvainan, the aliens were fellow brothers and sisters.

While they accepted the war would always take place between humans and aliens, it was no different from the wars that humanity already waged against themselves. In the larger scheme of things, the Ylvainans dreamed of a time where humans and aliens lived alongside each other in a single galactic community!

Their friendly stance on aliens did not endear the Ylvainan Faith to many states, particularly the secular ones. Their overarching belief that all forms of life would ascend to godhood did not sit well with many other religions that believed in the supremacy of their own gods!

Ves didn't know whether the Star Worshipers aggressively pushed the Ylvainans because of a faith or plain greed. What mattered was the Ylvaine Protectorate faced a continuous escalation of conflict that could erupt into outright war at any time!

Having kept to themselves for all this time, the Ylvainans found to their horror that their war readiness was not up to par compared to the more geopolitically-active Star Faith Collective.

No matter how much fervor the Protectors of the Faith possessed, a strong and sincere belief was not enough to win a battle on its own!

Strong mechs, blooded mech pilots, war-tested martial traditions and robust supply lines mattered more, and the Ylvainans came up short in each of these areas!

Ves and his staff already figured out some of these dynamics through their own research, but the data chip that Calabast threw at him at the end of their meeting painted a dire picture!

As Ves allowed Ketis, Gavin and Leland to study its contents, each of them seem amazed.

"Madame Cecily favors you very much if she is willing to pass on these unvarnished truths to us." Leland noted while looking sharply at Ves. "By chance, did you seduce her or something?"

"Pfff! Don't joke around, please." Ves replied. Even if Calabast looked gorgeous, she was still a spy! "We just found we had more things in common than we thought. As long as we fulfill her expectations, Madame Cecily is willing to elevate the LMC's presence in the Protectorate in order to whip the domestic mech industry back into shape. Each of us are using each other in more ways than one."

None of his staff understood the hidden meaning behind his words. Perhaps Leland might have caught something, but even he shouldn't be aware of Madame Cecily's true identity.

"You know, the predicament the Protectorate has fallen under is an excellent opportunity for us!" Gavin said with shining eyes. "The LMC is a mech company based in Brighter traditions, which counts for a lot since our customers can count on our mechs to perform well in heated conflicts."

"The Ylvainan mech market is significantly smaller than the one back home, though." Ves revealed. "The Ylvaine Protectorate doesn't have a very strong

and active mercenary tradition. It's primarily the private forces and smaller dynasties and organizations who are purchasing mechs."

Even a peaceful, isolated state like the Ylvaine Protectorate still possessed demand for commercial mechs

The reformers wanted their state to develop a stronger mercenary tradition. Not only would this strengthen the Protectorate's total strength, but also added a lot more flexibility to how it could be employed. Mercenary corps fulfilled a wide variety of roles, many of which the Protectors of the Faith couldn't be bothered to perform themselves.

With all the mercenary corps about to pop up in the future, the Ylvainan mech industry looked forward to enjoying a boom in sales. The last thing they wanted to see was foreign mech companies swooping in to steal their market share during these good times!

The Bright Republic was known for engaging in frequent war against the Vesians. Along with the relatively open competition in its mech market, the average quality standard was quite high!

The mech buyers in the Bright Republic weren't fools who put their lives on the line by buying bad products. Mech designers only enjoyed success in this state if their designs could keep up with the demands of medium to high-intensity conflict!

Although Ves felt very confident about the LMC's products, he did not think his company would be able to upend the Protectorate mech market by itself.

"I don't think we should look down on the local competition." He cautioned them all. "From what I can tell, their mechs may not be up to par against the mechs used by the Star Worshipers, but they are not too far behind. Once the domestic mech designers stop being complacent, they'll be able to offer very stiff competition."

Even though the Protectorate didn't import many foreign mechs, their domestic mech designers still absorbed information and knowledge from the outside galaxy. They kept up with the latest developments and trends and even licensed many component designs from foreign companies.

The key difference lay in the design. The real reason the Ylvainan mech industry resisted foreign pressure was that they knew that they hadn't sharpened their design skills as much!

If Ves and a random Ylvainan Journeyman each designed a mech out of the same set of component licenses, the latter would probably lose!

Ves predicted that a substantial amount of mech designers currently operating in the Ylvaine Protectorate faced a crisis as they were only competitive during the easy times!

While the Novices and Apprentices faced the brunt of the competition, the higher-ranking mech designers also faced a squeeze! They could say goodbye to the fat profit margins their companies earned as foreign competitors would be able to offer cheaper mechs with better performance.

Yet what the Ylvainan mech designers currently lacked, they could make it up over time. The entire point of opening up the mech market was to elevate the overall standard of mech design in the Protectorate. If foreign mech companies remained dominant after several decades, then a backlash might occur!

Ves summed up the situation. "In short, as long as we take advantage of the opportunity that Madame Cecily has presented to us, the LMC stands to gain a temporary lead in the Ylvainan mech market. During this time, we need to convert our initial gains into an enduring advantage!"

One of the most important steps to doing so was to become familiar with the Ylvainan style of mech design. Due to their low exposure to foreign mech

designs, the Ylvainan mech market developed some specific preferences with regards to the mechs they favored.

The morning after his meeting with Calabast, Ves and his staff went on a little excursion to explore the capital city of Kesseling VIII. The Avatars of Myth accompanying the business trip received permission to deploy some of their mechs to guard the group.

The Office of Strategic Mech Management dispatched a guide to accompany the Brighters and introduce them to some of the best sights on the planet.

"Krent is the oldest city on Kesseling VIII. It is famed for its vibrant industry and commerce as it offers very attractive conditions to businesses that settle here." Leon Dalvish spoke. "While there are more prosperous star systems in the Protectorate, most of it is occupied by dominant companies who are not very tolerant towards newcomers."

Ves nodded in understanding. "Kesseling VIII is doing quite well despite not being a port system."

The Ylvaine Protectorate happened to possess their own port system, but due to the state's long-standing policy of isolation, few foreign traders visited the place. While the Zophon System still developed into a strong domestic industrial nexus, it could have been so much more.

The Bright Republic took advantage of this situation by funneling all of the trade that would have passed by Zophon to Bentheim!

Now, it was too late for Zophon to take its rightful share of trade. Bentheim became too dominant for most trade companies to consider passing through an Ylvainan port system!

What Ves and the rest of his group noted the most was all the outward signs of devotion to the Ylvainan Faith. Statues, projections and other depictions of Prophet Ylvaine and his Martyred Followers were everywhere! The general

baroque and classical style of architecture fostered a very traditional mood among the locals that stood in stark contrast to the Bright Republic's more modern and fast-paced lifestyle!

"What's with all the beckoning gestures from the statues?" Ketis curiously asked.

"We believe that while Prophet Ylvaine and his Martyred Followers have transcended to a higher existence upon the moment of their mortal passing." Leon patiently explained. "We have faith that they are watching over us now, awaiting the time where everyone gets the opportunity to transcend and join their side. That is why they are holding out their hands in a welcoming fashion."

"What about the Ylvainans who die before this ascension event happens?" She asked.

"The Prophet states that their souls are washed and returned to new forms of life. Where they end up is a matter of chance and fate. A poor Ylvainan might be born a rich Ylvainan. A Kronon might be born as a Curin. Perhaps they can even become a Brighter, a Vesian, a Terran or even an alien in their next lives! We are all bound to the cycle of life and death before the Time of Ascension!"

It was safe to say that almost every outsider recoiled at this belief! The idea that a human could be reborn as an alien in their next lives was very anathematic to the dominant ideology of human supremacy!

Even Ves wanted to scratch his head at the idea. Had Prophet Ylvaine jacked himself up with recreational stimulants to come up with this controversial belief?

Chapter 1175 Faith in Design

Despite the strange beliefs of the Ylvainan Faith, Ves and the others did their best to show respect.

Clearly, Leon and the other Ylvainans knew that it was difficult to convert outsiders to their faith. While it would be nice if they could convert the Brighters to their beliefs, it wasn't the end of everything if they failed.

While Prophet Ylvaine expanded his cult aggressively during his lifetime, he never expressed any insistence of converting every human or alien to the Ylvainan Faith. If it was the opposite, then the Ylvainans wouldn't have isolated themselves in their own state for so long!

In the perspective of the locals, everyone was an Ylvainan! They just didn't know it yet! This was because when the Time of Ascension finally came, everyone would be elevated to gods without exception, even those who never came in touch with the Ylvainan Faith!

Therefore, Leon never insisted on pushing his own beliefs to the Brighters he guided around Krent. The Ylvainans believed that their devotion to the teachings and predictions of their prophet gave them a leg up from the others.

While the Ylvainans believed that everyone would transcend, the height of their new lives differed according to their devotion to the one true faith! The Ylvainans all expected to become the most preeminent leaders and shepherds among the new gods!

A lot of Brighters became googly-eyed when they first heard about this stance of the Ylvainans.

It was safe to say that a vast majority of outsiders didn't appreciate being dragged into the faith without their consent!

Ves reminded himself that he came to the Protectorate to conduct business. Both parties had an incentive to leave contentious matters of faith aside in favor of transacting with each other.

After touring the Grand Church and some other historical sights, Ves gained a much more intimate perspective of Ylvainan life.

While the Ylvainan Faith was present in everyone's lives, the average Ylvainans were remarkably mundane. Ves had to admit that he had bought into the stereotype that each Ylvainan was a radical, outspoken believer who constantly spouted Ylvaine's sayings.

The truth was very much more nuanced. Aside from the characteristically green-robed figures of the Attendants of Ylvaine, every other citizen of Krent were much more engaged in their work or their families.

While Bentheim was far more prosperous and developed than Kesseling VIII, Ves found the local citizens to be happier and more relaxed.

Whenever Ves visited Bentheim, he became used to the sight of busy Bentheimers under pressure from their jobs and the expenses they needed to pay to continue to live on the planet.

Both places exhibited very different paces. Life in Krent and Kesseling VIII was clearly more sedate.

The only downside that Ves could see was that the low pressure environment likely didn't lead to high productivity. Bentheim may be a hectic, faced-paced planet, but this was also the key to maintaining a high degree of productivity!

Only in the late afternoon did Leon take them to a site where they could view some of the locally-produced mechs up close. He took them to a depot which stored some old Ylvainan mechs owned by a defunct security company.

When Ves saw the mechs with his own eyes, he found the visual experience to be a lot more delightful than viewing them through a projection.

"The Ylvainan mech style is truly a sight to see!" He praised.

While the landbound mechs stored in the depot suffered from mild neglect, that did not detract from their artful appearances.

Many of the mechs looked grand as they adopted some of the baroque elements of Ylvainan architecture. Through centuries of using the same visual elements, the local mech designers developed a unique style of visual mech design that turned every mech into bastions of faith.

Ves was particularly impressed by the effortless way the local mech designers weaved depictions of Ylvaine and his Martyred Followers onto the surface of the mechs. In many instances, the figures were set in a backdrop of historical and fantastical events.

"Each Ylvainan mech is an extension of our faith." Leon spoke in a soft and respectful manner. "Whoever comes across one of our mechs will know that they are standing against our entire faith if they choose to engage in hostilities!"

"Do the local mech designers develop the outward appearances of their mechs themselves or do they leave the task to professional artists?"

"While borrowing the services of professional artists is common among Novices and Apprentices, we expect more from our Journeymen and Seniors. Each Ylvainan mech designer must prove their devotion to our faith if they expect to receive our appreciation and support."

"I see." Ves said with an impassive expression. "It must take a lot of time for mech designers to master this art style."

Leon shrugged. "I am not a mech designer, so I am not very sure about the difficulty. Some mech designers have a talent for art, and some are only capable of drawing mathematical diagrams. The Attendants of Ylvaine do not look kindly to those who are lax in their expression of devotion. For a long time, the laggards are driven out of business because we do not have a desire to pilot mechs that only pay lip service to our beliefs."

Ves silently locked eyes with Gavin. Both of them held the same opinion about this matter: crazy!

While mech design was both an art and a science, those who excelled in only the science aspect of their profession still possessed a lot of value! For the Ylvainans to drive them out of business because they were awful artists only weakened the foundation of their local mech industry!

It seemed that the reformers among the Ylvainans recognized this problem, hence their insistence on opening up the mech market.

As one of Madame Cecily's subordinates, Leon also believed in the need for change.

"For a long time, the Protectors of the Faith and our other Ylvainan mech forces piloted mechs that look just as impressive as these mechs." Leon gestured his arm at the devout-looking but abandoned machines. "However, when we first began to employ our mechs in skirmishes against the Star Worshipers, we found out that the signs of our outward devotion hasn't affected them at all. Their heretical belief in their so-called stellar gods has made them resistant against the true faith!"

Ves wanted to say that all the effort put into creating faith-compliant imagery distracted from the actual performance of the mechs. The Ylvainan mech buyers seem to prioritize the religious imagery of their mechs to an unnecessarily high degree!

"What about the use of imported mechs?"

"Admittedly, they performed better." Leon sighed. "They aren't really popular among most of our faithful mech pilots because they lack the iconography they are accustomed to. Yet during our infrequent clashes against the Star Worshipers, they have held out better than we expected. We've had some positive experiences with some of your company's mechs as well. It is no surprise to me that our director regards you highly."

Ves smiled back but didn't say anything. Calabast didn't care about the Ylvaine Protectorate or their weird beliefs. She just wanted to take advantage of the situation to cement their tentative partnership.

Nonetheless, the Ylvainan habit of decorating their mechs with religious imagery fascinated Ves regardless because it closely matched his interests. While Ves wasn't an adherent of the faith, he was confident he could emulate the art style.

He might even elevate it by blending in his specialty with this visual art style!

"Has anyone made any attempts at reducing the stigma of mechs that aren't laden with idols of your faith?" Gavin asked.

Obviously, he wanted to gauge whether the LMC needed to adapt their designs if they wanted to make it big in the Protectorate's mech market.

Leon shook his head. "There have been attempts. All have failed. The Attendants of Ylvaine are very insistent on this matter. The entire Poxco Dynasty have actively resisted any encroachments to this long-standing tradition."

"Does the Poxco Dynasty have a lot of mech designers in their sphere of influence?"

"All three leading dynasties have their own adherents among mech designers. Unfortunately..." Leon hesitated for a bit. "A number of mech designers have defected from the Curin Dynasty to the Poxco Dynasty as of late. The momentum in the Curin Dynasty has shifted towards reform, which has made many traditionalists feel unwelcome in our midst."

These traditionalist mech designers wanted to remain stuck in the past rather than go with the times. For them to feel so threatened by the reforms that they jumped ship said a lot about their confidence in their design skills!

These mech designers should be the ones who objected most vigorously the entry of foreign mech designers! The more foreign competition they faced, the more the shortcomings of their mech designs became more evident!

Ves and the others spent some time to study the abandoned mechs. While they were mostly budget mechs, Ves could vaguely tell that their performance wasn't so hot compared to equivalent mechs sold in the Bright Republic.

He estimated the difference in performance to be small, in the range of five to ten percent.

The real difference manifested in the pricing of the mechs. The locals faced less competition so they didn't feel very pressured in lowering their prices. The Ylvainan mech market was also smaller, so most mech companies needed to earn more with each sale because there were significantly less sales in total.

The market was starting to change, but outside competition was essential to change. The local mech industry would rather continue to rip off their customers than setting fairer prices for their products.

As Ves held onto Lucky and stroked his back, Ketis wandered over to his side.

"The way these Ylvainans design their mechs is just like how you design your gold label mechs." She remarked. "It should be a piece of cake for you to imitate an Ylvainan mech, right?"

"It's not that simple." Ves said. "Regardless of the reason why the Ylvainans value this visual design style so much, their mech designers are very sincere in expressing their faith. Just look at these machines and feel their pulses. Don't you think the Ylvainans might have a point when they refer to their mechs as bastions of faith?"

Ketis blinked and stared at the abandoned mechs without any comprehension. "They're just mechs. They look fancy, but that's all. Putting a nice coat over them doesn't magically make them better, right?"

"I have to disagree with you there, Ketis." Ves shook his head. "When an Ylvainan mech designer develops a mech, he expects them to be used by Ylvainan mech pilots. Both of them share the same beliefs, so it is a given that the mech designer tries to accommodate the mech pilot by adding elements that affirm their common faith. This will make the mech pilot feel more at ease with their mechs, which will help them draw out their potential and the potential of their machines."

"So kind of like what you're already doing, but without the religious stuff." She noted as she realized the similarity between the LMC's principles and the reasoning behind this Ylvainan tradition. "However, it's one thing to design a good-looking mech. It's another thing to design an Ylvainan mech. Aren't you violating a rule if you design an Ylvainan-style mech without believing in the faith?"

"I think I can manage." Ves confidently stated. "I've taken the measure of their design style, and I think I can provide the Ylvainans with something just as good if not better."

What Ves found remarkable about the Ylvainan mechs was that he didn't perceive the usual variety of muddled X-Factor. While their spiritual strength were still faint, their attributes were a bit more coherent than usual.

If the mech designer who designed the mech and mech technicians who fabricated the mech all shared the same beliefs, then it made sense for the X-Factor to be better than normal!

Paired with a mech pilot who shared the exact same faith, then a small improvement in performance ensued!

This tiny interaction must be one of the hidden reasons why much of the local mech community still favored this tradition.

Chapter 1176 Vampire

The visit to the depot left a deep impression to Ves. As a Brighter, he had mainly been exposed to the works of secular mech designers.

"The Bright Republic, the Vesia Kingdom, the Reinald Republic, the Friday Coalition and many parts of the frontier are all rooted in secular mech traditions." Ves explained to Ketis as they wandered through the dormant collection of Ylvainan mechs.

"What do you mean by that?" She asked.

"There is a very high emphasis among secular mech designers to prioritize function over form. Now, there's nothing wrong with that. A mech that performs better plainly enjoys more success. Most mech buyers don't care too much about how their mechs look like. At the very least, they aren't easily charmed by fancy-looking mechs if their specs are crap."

"A good looking trash mech will perform like garbage in battle."

"Exactly. Good aesthetics can enhance the desirability of a good mech design, but it can't salvage a bad mech design. These customs have led to a rather plain and utilitarian-focused design style. There's a tendency among mech designers in the states I've mentioned to design their mechs to look functional. If a mech looks capable in a fight, then they can appeal better to mech buyers who value this quality."

Ketis paused for a bit. "That sounds like a self-reinforcing mechanism. A mech with good specs will look like it performs well. A mech that looks capable is expected to perform at that level. What about your own designs, Ves? Many of your mech designs look like they belong in a museum or a mech show room rather than the battlefield."

"Humans love pretty things." He answered. "A mech with an appealing appearance doesn't necessarily have to be associated with bad performance. It's just that it's not always worth it from a practical level. All the cosmetic additions makes it harder for the mech technicians to service and repair the fancy-looking machines."

"It's still worth it for you."

"Right. The benefit to adding a unique appearance to my mechs is that they influence both their mech pilots and their opponents to their favor."

The mech pilots will feel better about their mechs and deliver a better performance.

Their opponents will be affected as well. They'll be distracted from analyzing the combat prowess of the mechs.

This was only the tip of the iceberg. A striking visual appearance helped the mech pilots of his product enter the right mood. The goal that Ves wanted to accomplish is to encourage his mech pilots to align their thoughts with the X-Factor of his mechs!

Maybe Calabast had no inkling of Ves was really capable of, but he really appreciated the opportunity to design a mech for Ylvainans this time. The qualities the Ylvainans demanded of their mechs meshed really well with his strengths!

The only issue that Ves faced was whether he could convey enough sincerity towards the Ylvainan Faith in his design process. As a foreigner and a non-

believer, the mech market should largely be skeptical of his attempts to copy the Ylvainan design style.

Ketis didn't seem hopeful either. "If you try to copy their style, won't they accuse you of being a poser?"

"They haven't seen what I'm capable of yet. I think I can deliver a pleasant surprise to the Ylvainans if I have the time to design a fitting mech."

The key was to impart the sincerity of the Ylvainan Faith in his mech designs. As someone who couldn't bring himself to believe in any tenets of the faith, that should be a considerable challenge!

Calabast already foresaw the problem. Her solution was to see if Ves could work together with a local mech designer.

The idea had some merit, though Ves preferred exerting full creative control over the visual design of his mechs. Art was something deeply personal to him and he did not wish for other mech designers to interfere with the meaning he tried to convey through his works.

Nonetheless, Ves was willing to meet with the mech designers who were willing to work with a foreigner.

"Not many mech designers are willing to associate with a foreign mech designer." Leon admitted. "Currently, there is a heavy stigma against collaborating with non-believers on a mech design. It has taken Madame Cecily a lot of effort to invite some mech designers who are willing to blaze a trail. Some are still on their way to the Kesseling System. When they are all here, they will meet with you in secret so as to avoid attracting the attention of the Attendants of Ylvaine."

Ves understood the difficulties an Ylvainan mech designer faced if they proactively worked together with a non-believer. Even though the Curin Dynasty would likely do whatever they can to support these brave mech

designers, the Poxco Dynasty would also do their best to make their lives difficult once their inclinations became known!

"I will do my best to see whether they are compatible with my design project, Leon. I'm only willing to involve a single Ylvainan mech designer. The project doesn't need more mech designers. Adding more will just add more confusion and will make it difficult to coordinate our efforts."

"Understood. We shall take your demands into account. Do you have any other questions?"

"Can you tell me what the mech designers are like?"

"They are largely young and less dogmatic. They strongly support the reform cause and are willing to stick their necks out as long as we provide enough incentives."

"That didn't sound very good to Ves. A suspicion crept up. "What are their ranks?"

"All five of the mech designers we've invited are Apprentices. We have rejected the application of Novices no matter how enthusiastic they are. While we've attempted to invite several open-minded Journeymen, they have all rejected the offer."

"I see. These Apprentices.. none of them should have solid backing, right?"

Leon smiled sheepishly at Ves, as if he had been caught out. "The Ylvaine Protectorate is a little more stringent in the amount of people who are allowed to study mech design. The independent Apprentices who have enjoyed a measure of success up to this point are all capable mech designers. Nonetheless, the Ylvainan mech market has been stagnant for a very long time, giving the smaller players very little room to grow and develop."

Ves understood what was going on here. The Apprentices who were desperate to accept an opportunity to collaborate with a foreign Journeyman must be desperate for guidance.

Even though he was just a de facto Journeyman who advanced very recently, this status still elevated him far above the Apprentices. Any advice or help he could provide over the course of the design project would be invaluable to their own progression!

He figured that Calabast must have her own considerations for pushing these mech designers forward. Perhaps she wanted to nurture some mech designers in her camp in order to strengthen her grip on the Protectorate's mech market.

Whatever the case, Ves was open to teaching an Ylvainan some tricks as long as they went along well with each other.

He had already mentored a pirate designer, so what was the harm in providing some guidance to an Ylvainan? It was not as if Ves was teaching some valuable lessons to a Vesian mech designer!

"There's more to inviting the Apprentices, right?" Ves asked. Calabast would never do something simple! "For these mech designers to step up and become a target to every Attendant of Ylvaine out there is a pretty heavy price to pay."

"That is true. The truth is that Madame Cecily is hoping that your initial collaboration with one of our local mech designers will spark something more. I believe that Madame Cecily wishes to reveal the full details of her plan in person."

"I will look forward to hear what she has to say." Ves said mildly.

His initial talk with Calabast mainly dealt with him getting around to accepting it. They hadn't gone over a lot of concrete details and plans for the short,

medium and long term as of yet. Ves needed more time to accept the new circumstances before he was ready to think ahead.

That night, Ves had an opportunity to meet Calabast again.

Vs left Lucky and everyone else behind at the guarded compound that Ylvainans provided to them as their temporary home on Kesseling VIII. While Leland quietly exited the compound and disappeared into Krent for some reason or another, Ves took a brief shuttle ride to the headquarters of the Office of Strategic Mech Management.

There, the staff guided him to a lavish, isolated dining room. Ves immediately felt the interference in the air as Calabast already activated a signal jammer ahead of time.

No one else except Ves and Calabast dined in the room. As each of them partook in the dishes that had already been delivered to their table, Ves brought up something important.

"How is our new partnership supposed to work?"

"What do you mean by that, Ves?"

"I can see how we can help each other out in the short term. You work on opening up the Protectorate for the LMC while I help boost your position in the Protectorate's power structure. That's simple enough for me to figure out. My question is what happens afterwards?"

Calabast sighed and paused in cutting her steak. "It is already a strenuous effort for me to assist the LMC in strengthening its position in the Protectorate. In ten or twenty years, I hope your company becomes one of the most prominent mech companies led by a Journeyman in the Protectorate. While designing really good mechs goes a long way into strengthening the LMC's market position, if you want to make your gains permanent, you need a permanent presence within our borders."

Ves frowned at that. "What does this permanent presence entail?"

"What I have in mind is a joint venture between the LMC and one of my holding companies. Both of us would invest an equal amount of money into a subsidiary that is equally owned by both companies. All the mechs designed by you and sold by the LMC will go through this subsidiary before they are sold on the Protectorate's mech market!"

A joint venture! Setting something like that up between him and Calabast was not a small decision! It required a lot of thought and consideration!

"I need to think over it." Ves guardedly replied. "A joint venture is hard to do right and easy to screw up. Why do you want a joint venture anyway?"

"It's easier to expand the presence of the LMC if it comes in an incarnation that is half-owned by an Ylvainan. As long as you can present a local face to your business activities, the opposition to working with the LMC is much less severe. It's an ugly fact that many Ylvainans still won't be able to accept a mech designed by a foreigner."

Ves tentatively nodded. "I agree with that logic. A joint venture for the purpose of making my designs more appealing to the local market can help a lot in that regard. The main problem I have with this suggestion is where you will be taking it. Both of us will own the joint venture. While you say that you are willing to split our control of the entity, are you planning to do something more?"

"Heh. You know me too well, Ves." Calabast smirked. "The LMC is very much your company, and I have no intentions of meddling with your business. However, a woman like me has needs. While I've brought along a considerable amount of seed money to fund my initial ventures in my new position, that pool will run out eventually. If I want to set up a comprehensive

network of informers and assist you in your endeavors, then I need a considerable stream of income."

"Ah. So it's about money."

"Yep. I'll be happy with half of the earnings the LMC makes in the Ylvaine Protectorate. After all, I've been working hard to facilitate your business in this state. Don't you think I deserve some remuneration from my services."

While Ves agreed with that sentiment, why did he feel like he was facing a money-draining vampire?

Chapter 1177 Joint Venture

Calabast wanted to set up a joint venture owned by their own companies. The purpose of this joint venture was to manage the LMC's business in the Ylvaine Protectorate.

Unlike other states with more open economies like the Reinald Republic, the Ylvaine Protectorate made it really difficult for foreign companies to do business.

Selling ten to fifty mechs a year did not arouse too much scrutiny, but beyond that more severe trade barriers kicked in. Higher tariffs, extra fees, longer inspections, stricter quality requirements, quotas and more all served to stop foreign companies from taking over the Ylvainan mech market.

And those were just the legal trade barriers. Ves learned from his earlier tour throughout Krent that the Ylvainan attitude towards mechs constituted an unofficial trade barrier. The local culture favored a specific visual style that most foreign mechs lacked.

If Ves wanted to design a mech that appealed to the Ylvainan mech market, then he needed to adapt his mech designs to local customs.

Perhaps a time would come when the Ylvainans would be okay with piloting mechs with standard, non-religious visual themes. Ves estimated that it would take decades to get to that point.

Right now, the market was just about to open up. Most Ylvainan mech pilots never touched a foreign mech design before. Those who piloted imported machines consisted of only a small proportion of mech pilots in the state.

Therefore, not only did it make a lot of sense to adapt to local customs, but also operate through a local subsidiary. As the joint venture would be set up in the Protectorate, it was for all intents and purposes a local company.

Through this legal construction, it was a lot easier for the Office of Strategic Mech Management to grant the company some important exemptions. The idea was that the joint venture imported the LMC's mechs from the Bright Republic and sold it to Ylvainan consumers under their brand name.

Ves began to look beyond this instance. There were many states like the Ylvaine Protectorate that restricted their economies. While it was a hassle to do business in those places, the reduced competition meant that as long as the LMC got in, it could make a handsome profit.

The need to establish subsidiaries and joint ventures owned by local partners would only increase in the future. While those daughter companies funneled a substantial share of earnings back to their local partners, the share of earnings received by the LMC would still be worth it as long as sales surpassed a certain volume.

The LMC might see a need to set up more joint ventures like the one that Calabast proposed. If that was the case, then Ves wanted to adopt a standardized approach to doing business in this fashion.

The most important burden for Ves was the need for local adaptation. The Ylvainans loved to make their mechs look like giant holy warriors of the

Ylvainan Faith, and none of his existing mechs matched these aesthetic requirements.

If the LMC wanted to sell the Blackbeak, Crystal Lord and the new Aurora Titan models in the Protectorate mech market, then the company needed to change their outward appearances!

Having studied the Ylvainan visual style, Ves possessed the confidence to emulate their works at the very least. It wouldn't take more than a week to restyle his existing mech designs. It wouldn't take much effort from him to do so for just three mech models.

Yet what about the future?

What if the LMC conducted business in a dozen states like the Ylvaine Protectorate? What if the LMC's mech catalog ballooned to twenty mech models? The amount of time Ves needed to spend on adapting all of his mech designs to the local customs of each difficult state would be immense!

One of the most important lessons that several Seniors imparted to Ves was that a mech designer's time was valuable. They should spend the bulk of their time designing new core mech designs.

While there may be a need to design variants or adapt an existing mech design to local customs, it didn't require the attention of someone as overqualified as Ves!

It was massively overkill for Ves to spend days or weeks of his precious time to adapt a mech design. Rather than do the work himself, why not delegate the responsibility to a locally-born mech designer?

They didn't need to be too skilled. They just needed to be immersed in the local culture and skilled in the changes that needed to be made

The proposal that Calabast put forward led Ves to consider all of these matters. If he wanted to use this approach to enter difficult foreign markets, then he needed to do it right the first time. As long as the joint venture was a success, the LMC could adopt the same model in other restricted markets.

The main issue was the matter of control. Owning a joint venture with a local partner meant that the LMC needed to share power with someone else. It would be fine if they both agreed on a single direction, but what if their opinions differed?

The second complication was that the joint venture needed to retain a local mech designer who could be trusted. It would not be good if the subsidiary hired a local mech designer and trained him or her at great expense only for them to resign a few years later.

All of these matters concerned Ves greatly, but he knew he didn't have to manage all of these issues alone. Ves had already prepared the LMC for these kinds of occasions.

Therefore, as soon as Calabast handed over a data pad containing all of the necessary contracts and other paperwork, Ves simply handed it over to Gavin once he returned to the guest compound.

"What's this?" Gavin asked.

"It's a set of documents for setting up a joint venture between the LMC and the Curin Development Holding Company. The CDHC is wholly owned by Madame Cecily, so the joint venture we plan to erect in the Protectorate is owned by me and her. The purpose of the joint venture is to serve as a channel for the LMC to export mechs to the Protectorate."

Ves took the time to explain all of the reasoning behind the move.

The only snag was that Gavin became a bit puzzled by how easily Ves agreed to Madame Cecily's proposal. How could Ves explain to him that Calabast wasn't a woman who accepted 'no' for an answer?

"Fifty percent is a bit much if you ask me. Considering all of the work you're doing, Madame Cecily is earning a disproportionate amount of money while not doing nearly as much. Also, isn't it a conflict of interest for the Director of Strategic Mech Management to profit off her own policy decisions?"

Ves smirked. "This isn't the Bright Republic, Benny. The Curin Dynasty has a tight grip on the economy and they can do whatever they want as long as they don't encroach on the interests of the other leading dynasties too much. What Madame Cecily is doing is not exactly proper but not unheard of for the Curins. Some of the money she stands to earn will be funneled back to the Curin Dynasty, so they don't have much of an interest to set the matter straight."

"I'll send these files to the LMC so the lawyers and other experts can sink their teeth in them." Gavin asked as he skimmed through the documents. "It doesn't mention a company name. How will you name the joint venture?"

"Let's keep it simple. Just name it the Living Mech Ylvaine Corporation or something." Ves shrugged.

"You're the boss."

Ves could leave the bureaucracy and administration of the joint venture to the LMC. The only matter that he couldn't delegate was the design aspect. He needed to find a suitable Ylvainan mech designer to helm the LMYC and instruct them in how to adapt his mech designs under his supervision.

He would be meeting some of the local mech designers soon enough. Hopefully, Ves found at least one of them to be acceptable enough to become a representative of the LMC.

Starting a subsidiary in the Protectorate that was owned by both a local and a foreign company could not be accomplished in a short amount of time.

Calabast already warned Ves that it might take more than a month due to all of the approvals she needed to obtain from various different authorities.

The only other event of note to Ves was that Leland returned to the compound late at night. The spy requested a private meeting with Ves to discuss his findings.

Leland deployed his own signal jammer, forestalling Ves from telling the spy that Lucky had already blocked the listening devices built into the walls.

"I've been snooping around in Krent on my own." Leland said. "I was probably followed for a good while, but I've been observing how the Ylvainans are really like outside of the prosperous parts of the city."

"I take it you did more than that during your solo exploration." Ves remarked with an expression that told Leland that he didn't buy into his story this time.

"Heh." Leland shrugged with a smile. "Alright. I did more than study the locals. I also picked up some information from some of our informers on the planet."

"Flashlight has informers on Kesseling VIII?"

"Everyone has eyes and ears everywhere. Just because the Protectorate likes to close their borders most of the time doesn't mean it's impossible to infiltrate their society. The Bright Republic is very interested in keeping tabs on the Ylvainans."

"So have you gathered any useful intel?"

"Most of it isn't relevant to you." Leland stated. "I can tell you a couple of things, though. From what I gather, there's trouble brewing in the Ylvainan mech industry. The traditionalist mech designers and the Poxco Dynasty are both banding together to resist the entry of foreign mech designers like you."

They've heard of your arrival and they are cooking up several plans to make you fail."

"Do you know anything more solid than that?"

"Not for now." Leland shook his head. "All of the decisions are being made at the higher levels. It's impossible to listen in on those discussions." Leland shook his head. "I can make some guesses, though. A good way to discredit you is to challenge you to a design duel and have your work compete against the work of a traditionalist mech designer of the same rank."

"I see. I can see how that can be challenging."

The key phrase here was a mech designer of the same rank. De facto Journeymen like Ves were so rare that the Protectorate likely didn't have any in its entire history!

Therefore, to present a legitimate design duel challenge, the traditionalists needed to present an Apprentice or Journeyman Mech Designer.

Sending in a Senior to challenge Ves was outright bullying and would never be taken seriously.

Sending in an Apprentice was seeking death. While Ves was merely a newly-minted Journeyman, it still meant he had fully matured in his ability to design mechs!

The only other choice would be to send out a fellow Journeyman to issue a challenge. On the surface, one Journeyman challenging another Journeyman should be a fair competition.

Ves didn't think it would be so simple.

If they were willing to be a little shameless, the traditionalists would probably send in an older and more experienced Journeyman with at least half a century of design experience under his belt!

On the surface, the design duel would still be between two mech designers of the same rank. If Ves refused such a challenge, the traditionalists would do their best to mock him for his cowardice and make it immensely more difficult for the LMC to find its footing in the Protectorate mech market!

"Thank you for the heads up, Leland." Ves nodded in appreciation. "I'm not afraid of an uphill challenge. Now that I know what's up, I can prepare ahead of time."

"That's not the extent of the measures the opposition plan to employ against you. I've heard rumors that there is something worse in store. While I haven't been able to verify this intel, there's a possibility that the Ylvaine Dynasty might make a move on you!"

"What?!" Ves looked up at that. "Hasn't the Ylvaine Dynasty been exterminated? I thought that Prophet Ylvaine's descendants were all dead!"

Chapter 1178 True Believers

"The real Ylvaine Dynasty has indeed been exterminated." Leland smirked.

"I'm not talking about the historical dynasty. I'm actually referring to the current incarnation of the Ylvaine Dynasty. Don't you think a state like the Ylvaine Protectorate is a little too peaceful on the surface? Why do you think there is still an active mech market if everything is supposedly fine and dandy in the state?"

Ves frowned and thought about it for a moment. "You mean the Ylvaine Dynasty is not a legitimate entity in the Protectorate?"

"Correct! Guerilla fronts riddle the Vesia Kingdom. The Bentheim Liberation Movement has haunted the Bright Republic for centuries. The Ylvaine Protectorate is no exception. They're plagued by the existence of an organization that has unilaterally taken up the mantle of Ylvaine Dynasty. If you ask an Ylvainan official, they prefer to call them the New Ylvaine Dynasty in order to disassociate the current one to the original one."

"So what is this New Ylvaine Dynasty fighting for that pisses off the rest of the Protectorate so much?"

"It's a long story." Leland sighed and sat down. "I'll keep it short as best I can. Basically, the New Ylvaine Dynasty purportedly claims leadership over the Ylvaine Faith, which also includes the state by extension. The three leading dynasties that are currently in charge were never meant to lead the Ylvainan Faith. They originally rose to assist Prophet Ylvaine and his descendants in managing the growing religion."

"Then the Prophet and his entire family got killed by states who felt increasingly threatened by his cult." Ves quickly said. "I know this part of the story already."

"Well, you should know that while the old Ylvaine Dynasty has indeed become extinct, the Ylvainans managed to secure plenty of tissue samples of Prophet Ylvaine and his many descendants. The prophet was a very... active father when he was alive. Samples of his hair, skin and other biological material can be found all over the place. Combined with the tissue samples collected from his descendants, and you have a very complete and very extensive genetic data bank of the most pivotal figures in the Ylvainan Faith!"

Ves could see how that could become a very huge problem. "I see. Bringing the dead back to 'life' in this fashion is very controversial, to say the least."

"The Kronons, Poxcos and Curins all collected plenty of tissue samples of the prophet and much of his family line. They didn't do anything but store them in the vaults of their colony ships as they fled to the galactic rim. Once they settled down in the territory that would become their state, they finally had the time to consider what they should do with the genetic material. With the medical technology at hand, it's possible for them to birth a baby that possesses the exact same genes as the original founder. The question isn't whether they can, but whether they should. Is it right to revive their prophet?"

What a question. The elders of the three leading dynasties must have wracked their heads over this issue for years!

"I take it they refused. It would go against the predictions and beliefs of Prophet Ylvaine." Ves guessed.

"Correct. Everyone knows that a clone or a designer baby modeled after someone else would never grow up the same. Clones are defective from birth while designer babies always turn out to be completely different individuals. None of the Ylvainans would be able to stand it the clone of Prophet Ylvaine turns out to be a moron!"

"The Kronon, Poxco and Curin Dynasties are probably unwilling to relinquish the power they obtained." Ves added. "If the Ylvaine Dynasty ever returns to power, the other three dynasties are relegated to subordinates again. If I was an elder of those dynasties, I would probably hesitate to hand over power to a completely unknown entity."

Leland nodded in agreement. "That has played a role as well. There's one more reason why the survivors of the persecution haven't revived Ylvaine's bloodline. Their doctrine won't allow such a matter to occur. It goes against their core beliefs."

"Ah, I see." Ves immediately understood once the spy mentioned that reason. "The Ylvainans believe that those who die are reincarnated back into a different form of life. Some Ylvainans believe that Prophet Ylvaine has already been reborn in another part of the galaxy and is busy expanding the faith there. Other Ylvainans believe that the prophet has already ascended to godhood and is looking down on us all right now."

If the surviving Ylvainans attempted to bring back Prophet Ylvaine by crafting him a new body, then they would be profaning their very beliefs! Life after

death was a very sacred matter and it was not the role of mortals to interfere with this natural process!

Leland sighed and crossed his arms. "Obviously, the existence of the New Ylvaine Dynasty means that not everyone agreed with leaving the prophet behind. There are.. extremists among the Ylvainans who worship the prophet to a very great degree. They broke into the vaults, stole some of the prophet's tissue samples, and cooked up a new 'Prophet Ylvaine' in their labs."

Both of them grimaced. Ves looked disgusted. "Is the new prophet even a functioning human being?"

"We don't know for sure, but probably not. In the early days, the New Ylvaine Dynasty kept producing new clones, but they never functioned very well. Eventually, they decided to conceive a designer baby that possesses the exact same genes as the prophet. The baby was born from a devout mother and grew up naturally. You can imagine his upbringing is anything but normal."

The baby would have grown up believing he was the second incarnation of Prophet Ylvaine! That would certainly warp his personality when he became an adult!

"Is the new 'prophet' being used as a figurehead by the actual masterminds?"

"For a long time, there have been several incarnations of the prophet over the years, so this possibility is likely." Leland said. "None of the prophets receive any life-prolonging treatments, and they also have a tendency to die faster than normal. They must have done something to displease the real masters behind the New Ylvaine Dynasty. All of that changed one day."

An offshoot of the Ylvainan Faith that believed in the supremacy of Prophet Ylvaine would never allow his incarnations to suffer at the hands of others!

Ves could already guess the sequence of events. "The prophet was not content to serve as a puppet and rebelled against his masters?"

"Correct. By gathering a lot of support from the grassroots members of the cult, the latest incarnation of the prophet succeeded in dethroning the old rulers of the New Ylvaine Dynasty. He's in charge of it up until this day."

"So how does the New Ylvaine Dynasty ties back to me? It sounds like they are very much opposed to the three leading dynasties."

"It's.. more complex than that." Leland hesitated. "The trouble with extremist organizations like this is that they can find plenty of sympathisers from the local population. The real prophet is a revered figure. Some Ylvainans are susceptible to manipulation that causes them to believe that the actual prophet has come back to life to lead his flock once more."

"Just like the BLM back home."

This was the same kind of problem that the Bright Republic faced with the Bentheim Liberation Movement. As long as local Bentheimers detested the central government of the Bright Republic, the BLM would always be able to recruit new sympathizers from their midst!

"While all three leading dynasties are opposed to the heretical existence of the True Believers as they call themselves, there are some hardliners who are much less opposed to the return of Prophet Ylvaine. The hardliners among the traditionalists are most sympathetic to the forbidden dynasty. The line between radicals and extremists is razer thin."

All of this tied back into the threat Ves faced. "If some of the traditionalists are colluding with the True Believers, then they can probably ask the latter for a favor. Considering their stances, they both have many reasons to oppose the reform agenda. My existence poses a threat to both their causes."

"We should make sure our security arrangements are adequate." Leland advised.

"That's a good idea."

Ves always took danger into account, but he figured it was only a remote threat during this business trip. Now that Leland believed that the True Believers might make a move themselves, then he needed to be a lot more careful with his actions during his stay on Kesseling VIII!

The next morning, Ves was scheduled to meet with the Kronon mech pilots who he needed to serve. He first paid a visit to Miss Cecily's office. Once there, he immediately broached the matter about the threat he faced.

"Calabast, why didn't you tell me about the New Ylvaine Dynasty?"

A mild frown appeared on her face. "They are none of your concern. The Curin Dynasty is highly opposed to the True Believers. They're merely a fringe element in the Protectorate."

"Leland painted a slightly different story on them. Supposedly, they have a lot of hidden support."

"That's what insurgent organization wants you to believe. When you are weak, pretend to be strong. The True Believers have always puffed themselves up to make them seem bigger than they actually are. Their actual numbers are quite modest as they never managed to convey legitimacy to their fake prophet."

"I don't know." Ves pursed his lips. "It sounds dangerous to underestimate an enemy."

"If it makes you feel better, I can strengthen your guard detail. Are you happy now?"

He accepted this concession. Even if Calabast was right, he still wanted some assurances. Aside from enjoying the protection of the Avatars of Myth he

brought along this trip, the Protectors of the Faith also assigned some mechs and men to keep him safe.

All of this was more than adequate enough to guard an average Journeyman, but even that wasn't enough for Ves!

"Alright, I'll hold you to your promise." He said. "I'm ready to meet with the six young mech pilots."

"Good. We'll be taking a trip underground. All of our mechs and mech pilots are stationed underneath the headquarters."

They exited Calabast's office where Ketis and Lucky both joined him again.

Right now, Gavin was back at the compound coordinating the effort to set up a joint venture. Leland begged off another visit in favor of diving into the city of Krent on his own again.

Surrounded by guards, they all rode an elevator downwards. Once there, they entered a very wide underground corridor with enough space for several mechs to walk alongside each other.

There, they passed through several human and mech-sized doors.

"Due to the contentious nature of our work, its necessary for the Protectors of the Faith to ensure our safety." Calabast explained in her identity as Madame Cecily. She looked and acted completely different from her actual persona!

"The Kronons have dispatched sixty mechs and mech pilots so far, split between landbound, aerial and spaceborn mechs. Six more landbound mech pilots have joined recently after I made some agreements with the Kronons. They're different than others."

"They must be. Hero mechs can't be piloted by regular mech pilots." Ves remarked.

After crossing halfway through the huge underground corridors, they entered a training hall where a small number of mech pilots were exercising their bodies.

"Director Curin!"

The mech pilots present immediately came to attention. Calabast waved at them to resume what they were doing and moved forward.

They entered a smaller chamber where six mech pilots already climbed out of their simulator pods.

"Director!"

"Here they are, Ves." Madame Cecily gestured her arm at the six. "These are the mech pilots who will be piloting the mechs I commissioned. Are they to your satisfaction?"

Ves scrutinized the six mech pilots. They consisted of a mix of men and women who had all shaved their hair to buzz cuts. That along with their austere Kronon piloting suits lent them a very disciplined air.

They reminded him of the young Larkinson mech pilots in their devotion to their training.

"They seem.. adequate. I will have to see them in action before I can say anything more."

Chapter 1179 Ascensionists

Ves already made a preliminary judgement about the six young Kronon mech pilots. When they all entered their simulator pods in order to demonstrate their performance in simulated battle scenarios, his initial impression only grew stronger.

"These mech pilots are young elites." He remarked. "Their fundamentals are very strong."

The simulated battles showcased their strengths and superior training. All six of them piloted generic hero mechs with a moderate degree of skill.

While that didn't sound very impressive at first, it took a lot of effort to turn a hero mech into an asset rather than a liability on the battlefield! The skill floor of piloting such a complicated mech was so high that many mech pilots could outright forget about specializing in this mech type!

The key here was that all six mech pilots didn't look any older than Jannzi Larkinson. All of them must have been recent graduates from Protectorate mech academies. While they lacked actual battle experience, they still had lots more room to grow, which made them incredibly valuable!

The price to obtain these immature elites must be pretty high!

There must be a story behind their addition to Calabast's bodyguard roster.

"How did you get the Kronon Dynasty to relinquish these mech pilots under your care?" Ves asked. "Won't they regret the decision? What stops them from calling them back?"

"The Kronons won't do that." Madame Cecily mildly smiled. "The six elites are better off here than anywhere else. I'll make sure of that."

"What gives you all of that confidence, madame?"

"To understand that, you must understand the Kronon Dynasty. The Kronons are called the Protectors of the Faith. The state military is also called the Protectors of the Faith. Do you know what this means?"

"The entire Kronon Dynasty is the state military!"

"Your Bright Republic is very different in this regard. Your professional military accepts recruits from every family regardless of their background. Here in the Protectorate, each mech pilot in active service is a Kronon. In essence, the Protectors of the Faith is what happens when a notable military family like

your Larkinsons has grown to such an immense size that it is capable of performing the role of your Mech Corps!"

What a frightening thought! The Mech Corps would look very different if every active mech pilot was a Larkinson!

"What about mech pilots who aren't Kronons?"

"Those who emerge from the other Dynasties are usually trained and retained by their own. Potentates who emerge from common roots are given the opportunity to become branch members of the Kronon Dynasty as long as they do their duties. This is a very powerful incentive because the Kronon name bestows a lot of privileges to the mech pilots and their immediate family members!"

""What are the backgrounds of the six elites?"

"They don't come from common stock, if that's what you're wondering. In fact, they are all offspring from the genuine line of Kronons. Their heritage afforded them much stricter training. Each of them has managed to keep up with the highest standard of training the Kronon Dynasty offers to its mech cadets. All of them graduated from their mech academy with distinction."

Ves knew that this was high praise. In the Bright Republic, even many Larkinson mech pilots struggled to graduate from the mech academies with distinction. The extra training they received from the Larkinson Family wasn't entirely enough to turn them all into elites.

"So what's the problem?" Ves wondered. "The Protectors of the Faith must have their own elite mech regiments, right? Why haven't they jumped at these promising seeds?"

"Their skills are more than enough to turn them valuable mech pilots. The problem is that the Protectors of the Faith imposes more demands than

competence. To be a true Protector of the Faith, a Kronon must uphold the right beliefs!"

Ah. So this was the reason. "Is it a big deal?"

"Not to you, maybe. There are different interpretations of the Ylvainan Faith. The Attendants of Ylvaine has done their best to propagate one standard interpretation, but differences of opinion always take place. There are some Ylvainans who emphasize different aspects of the faith over others. The six mech pilots assigned to me are guilty of adhering to the Mortal Ascension Doctrine."

"What does that entail?"

"In short, the Ascensionists believe that the Time of Ascension is not the only way to ascend to godhood and join Prophet Ylvaine's side. They believe that it is possible for them to evolve step-by-step and ascend to Prophet Ylvaine's height through their own efforts! This belief is particularly appealing to some Ylvainan mech pilots because they are convinced that advancing in rank is a surefire way to ascend!"

Both Ves and Ketis blinked at that.

"How far do they need to go until they reach Prophet Ylvaine's level?" Ves asked.

"God pilot!"

"Impossible!" Ketis burst out. "Even I know that only a hundred or so god pilots exist out of every mech pilot in existence! The chance of advancing all the way up to god pilot is a pipedream!"

"Ah, just because it's nearly impossible doesn't mean the path is cut off entirely, young lady." Madame Cecily smiled at her. "In truth, Prophet Ylvaine's predictions and sayings aren't always very precise or specific on

many matters. This has left some room open for a specific interpretation that literally sees god pilots as gods in human form. When you hear of the awe-inspiring powers they are able to wield, it is not a very outlandish comparison."

Now that he thought about it, it did seem convenient when the best mech pilots in the galaxy were regarded as gods in human form!

"How do existing god pilots fit into this belief? None of them has said anything about meeting any transcended prophets."

"The Ascensionists state that god pilots who aren't converted to the Ylvainan Faith aren't worthy to receive a visit from the prophet. While their achievements are admirable and serve as an example to every human mech pilot, they are ignorant of the meaning behind their ascension. They are full of power but blind to the actual truth, at least if you ask an Ascensionist."

What a bold thing to say about god pilots! Both Ves and Ketis looked shocked that the Ascensionists dared to describe the great god pilots of the human race as blind and ignorant!

"So why does the Kronon Dynasty opposes this doctrine? Is it because it disrespects existing god pilots?"

"We Ylvainans don't care about that." Madame Cecily shook her head. "It's merely that most of us can't stomach the thought of being able to ascend to godhood before the arrival of the Time of Ascension. The most accepted interpretation of Prophet Ylvaine's prediction is that every human, alien, plant and other living entity will join his side at the appointed time. Ylvainans who are eager to take a shortcut and ascend ahead of this fateful time are considered presumptuous."

"So they aren't heretics?"

"As I've mentioned, Ves, There are many interpretations of the Ylvainan Faith. The Attendants of Ylvaine has done their best to stamp out the most radical

ones, but the more harmless and inconsequential ones like the Mortal Ascension Doctrine are allowed to exist."

All these religious off-shoots were already giving Ves a headache. First, he learned about the existence of the extremist New Ylvaine Dynasty. Now, he learnt that the mech pilots he needed to supply with his hero mechs were also radicals.

While the Mortal Ascension Doctrine sounded harmless, they were nonetheless too weird to be accepted by the Kronon Dynasty! While they were still Protectors of the Faith, to be assigned as a bodyguard of the Curins was effectively a form of exile.

With the proficiency these young elites displayed, they should have been shoo-ins for prestigious elite mech regiments! Instead, they had been assigned to dead-end postings as mere bodyguards. In this capacity, there were few opportunities to promote up the hierarchy of the Protectors of the Faith.

"Is there anything else that I need to know about the Ascensionists? It's important for me to get a good understanding of who they are if I want to design the right mechs."

A short silence ensued as Calabast studied the simulated battle footage. "The Ascensionists is a fringe belief among the Protectors of the Faith. Those who believe in the doctrine are all devout, but a bit more open to change than usual. What's important to them is that they don't want to pilot a mech that is completely designed by non-believers. That's why I insist that you collaborate with at least one local mech designer. You will never get these six to pilot your mechs if they don't perceive any sincerity towards the Ylvainan Faith in your mech designs."

Ves nodded in understanding. "I have already taken that into consideration. Please be assured that the hero mechs I design for them will meet their practical as well as their spiritual needs."

His remark earned a peculiar glance from Ketis, but she declined to say anything. Instead, she went back to stroking Lucky's body who was resting in her comfortable grasp.

Unlike his fellow mech designer, Calabast missed the double meaning in his latest remark. "I expect you to do your utmost in pleasing these six young Ascensionists. Their standards are higher and they are not shy about their willingness to refuse a good mech if they believe it will not help them in their path to ascension. Remember, this commission partially serves as a test run to see if you are capable of meeting the needs of the Ylvainan mech market."

That meant that as long as Ves could prove he could please these discerning customers, his other mechs should be more than acceptable to the Ylvainan mech market.

The intention of Calabast was clear. The commission she issued to the LMC was both a test and a training opportunity to him. Not only would he be able to see whether he possessed the ability to meet the needs of Ylvainan mech pilots, but he could also work with some of them closely during the design process.

"Don't worry, Madame Cecily. I appreciate the opportunity to prove myself. Even if I am not an Ylvainan, I think I can make a lot of contributions to the local mech market."

Half of what Ves and Calabast said to each other was pure theater. Madame Cecily's staff and bodyguards all appeared to be genuine retainers of the Curin Dynasty rather than her own plants. They owed their loyalty to the Curin Dynasty and Madame Cecily Curin rather than a shady foreign spy.

Ketis couldn't help but comment on the six mech pilots. "You know, the way they fight reminds me a little of the Swordmaidens who earned the right to pilot the Silver Valencias. They aren't just good, but they also fight like they are driven by a mission."

Now that she mentioned it, Ves noted this detail as well.

Many mech pilots had the unfortunate tendency to pull back the throttle during simulation battles. They weren't piloting real mechs and their lives were never at risk. Even those who wanted to show off would always hold back to some extent.

Not these mech pilots. The Ascensionists fought as hard as the most motivated and passionate mech pilots he had witnessed among the Vandals and Swordmaidens! It was as if they treated the simulation battles as genuine life-and-death struggles!

"Those who convert to the Mortal Ascensionist Doctrine are all high performers among the Protectors of the Faith." Calabast added. "It takes a lot of confidence for mech pilots to believe they have a chance to advance to god pilot. This is why the Ascensionists have always numbered very little. The Kronons are only annoyed at them because this small but persistent belief has corrupted several promising mech pilots over the years."

The fervor exhibited by the Ascensionist mech pilots prompted Ves to recall another force besides the Vandals and Swordmaidens.

The Ascensionists reminded him of the Worshipers of Haatumak.

Chapter 1180 Monotonous Lives

Ves spent some time to talk to the six Kronon mech pilots after they displayed their prowess in the simulation battles.

Overall, they didn't have much to talk about. The elite mech pilots devoted much of their lives to piloting mechs and the Ylvainan Faith.

While Ves became impressed by their quiet intensity and their religious fervor, he found them to be rather bland aside from their narrow interests. Describing them as warrior monks seemed apt. They didn't really have a life outside of their devotion to serving in the Protectors of the Faith.

Even if they had become the black sheep of the Kronon Dynasty, they still had faith in their mission!

One of them was slightly different. While the other five Kronons showed evident dislike at interacting with a foreigner who didn't share their beliefs, one young man looked at Ves with a disturbing amount of intensity.

"What's your name?" Ves asked.

"Taon Melin, sir." The Kronon said with respect.

"You don't appear to be as reticent as the others. Why so?"

"I've seen copies of your mechs before during my prior assignment." Taon said. "The.. Blackbeak, was it? The moment I laid eyes on them, the desire to pilot them sparked within me. Despite not looking anything like an Ylvainan mech, I wanted to pilot it more than any other machine!"

That caused his other five colleagues to look askance at Taon. Obviously, his lack of xenophobia didn't entirely sit well with the rest.

Ves gestured to himself. "You're not disturbed that I'm a foreigner?"

"What's there to be afraid of? We are all destined to transcend in the end. Whether you're an Ylvainan or not, we will all become brothers and sisters in the end!"

One of the other mech pilots looked irked. "Taon, I think your interpretation of Ylvaine's predictions is a little too generous."

Taon didn't pay any mind to the criticism. Mild arguments over their beliefs happened all the time.

"Regardless of whether Mr. Larkinson is a foreigner or not, his mechs are something else. Haven't you heard about what happened during the introduction of his Aurora Titan model?"

All of them fell silent for a bit. While the Ylvaine Protectorate generally didn't pay too much attention to affairs in other states, the advancement of both Ves and Jannzi Larkinson was too explosive! News of this remarkable event spread to neighboring states, arousing the interests of many mech insiders!

"Think of what he can do for us now that he's designing a mech for us." Taon continued. "Mr. Larkinson has proven he can design a mech that can help someone advance. Piloting his mechs is our greatest chance to take a step forward on the road to ascension!"

During this interaction, Ves glanced at Calabast in her Ylvainan persona.

She met his gaze and nodded. "My mech pilots wouldn't have worked with you at all if not for your recent stunt. They'll grumble a bit, but they can set aside their aversion to foreigners if they can pilot a mech that is just as good as the Aurora Titan."

"Do you think it's easy to design a mech like the Aurora Titan, madame?" Ves quickly replied. "I collaborated with an esteemed Senior on that design. While I've advanced to Journeyman now, the conditions that allow me to design a machine as good as the Aurora Titan aren't present."

"Just do the best you can. These mech pilots all believe you can recreate the magic of your previous design."

It seemed that ever since the Aurora Titan made a splash in the news, Ves became known as the mech designer who could help mech pilots enter the realm of expert pilots.

He quietly scoffed. How could it be so easy to advance? So many mech pilots struggled all their lives to shed their mundane existences, but only a tiny

fraction ever succeeded. Having a good mech might help a bit, but it mostly depended on the mech pilots themselves to break through their mortal shackles.

Curious, Ves employed his spiritual vision to take a quick peek at the six mech pilots.

As expected, none of them possessed any significant amount of spiritual energy. While their minds were a lot more disciplined and focused than other mech pilots, there really wasn't a lot of diversity in thought and emotion.

Ves observed this kind of condition in many elite mech pilots. Even the Swordmaidens suffered from this problem.

Despite their harsh training and discipline that should have been conducive to forming a coherent force of will, the spiritual energy simply wasn't there to fuel the process.

In contrast, the Larkinson Family didn't train their mech pilots nearly as harshly, yet still managed to produce a couple of expert pilots in every generation.

He developed a hypothesis behind this difference. To form a force of will, a strong and disciplined mind wasn't enough.

What was the meaning of life if your entire life revolved around service? All these elite mech pilots completely devoted their lives to their jobs, to the detriment of everything else. They didn't make any friends outside of their own circle and they neglected their families in their pursuit of advancement. They had no hobbies to speak of and their existence was completely negligible aside from their profession.

Their monotonous living pattern made them no different from bots in human form. While Ves still had no explanation of what spiritual energy actually

consisted of, he began to develop an inkling that it possessed an intricate relationship to life!

Ves sensed many people with his spiritual senses. Very few possessed spiritual energy in significant quantities. Therefore, he wasn't sure about the strength of his hypothesis. There might be a possibility that an elite mech pilot who did nothing else still managed to advance.

In any case, while Ves did not sense any significant spiritual energy from Taon and the other mech pilots right now, it might be different in the future. They also didn't necessarily have to rely on spiritual energy generated from themselves to form a force of will, as Eloise Pelican's case had already proved!

When Ves, Madame Cecily and the rest bid goodbye to the mech pilots and moved away, he couldn't help but make a remark.

"You should give the young mech pilots a break every now and then?"

Calabast raised an eyebrow. "Hmm?"

"It's not good for mech pilots to spend all of their waking moments in a cockpit, simulator pod or training hall."

"They already go out frequently. Like any devout Ylvainan, they regularly attend the services at the nearest church."

"That's not good enough." Ves shook his head. "Take it as an advice from a Larkinson. A well-rounded mech pilot needs to have more in their lives than their jobs and their faith."

"It's not in my purview to manage the lives of the Protectors of the Faith. They have their own chain of command. Even if they are assigned to protect me, they are not obliged to follow my orders." Calabast sighed.

Although she wielded a considerable amount of authority in her cover identity, her ability to act directly was no longer as strong as before.

Ves still cared a bit about this issue, though. "Then take up the suggestion to their commanders. Elite mech pilots or not, you are doing your bodyguards a disservice by letting them keep to themselves."

"Is this the wisdom of the Larkinsons?"

Walking alongside Ves, Ketis couldn't help but say her own peace. "If their jobs and their faith is all they live for, what happens if both are taken away from them one day?"

"There would be nothing left." Ves said.

This gave them all a lot of food for thought. Eventually, they reached the ground floor of the headquarters.

"The mech designers we've invited will arrive in two days." Calabast said. "I hope you find at least one of them acceptable enough to work with. While none of them are exceptional mech designers, their willingness to cooperate is very high."

"Well see." Ves said without commitment. He had his own bottom line. "Is there anything else to do for me in the next two days while we wait for their arrival?"

Calabast thought for a moment. "I will dispatch Leon to you to take you to a service at the grand church tomorrow. Our faith is central to our identity. You need to develop a good understanding of our faith if you want to design mechs that appeal to our people."

"I appreciate the opportunity." Ves replied.

He couldn't reconcile the Calabast he knew with the mild and pious image of Madame Cecily.

Ves and the rest took a guarded shuttle ride back to their temporary compound. Once there, Leland awaited his arrival with a grim face.

"Someone has run through our luggage while we were gone." He said the moment Ves arrived.

That cause Ves to look up in alarm. "What? But there are guards!"

"Well, someone managed to sneak past them anyway. The intruder managed to bypass the security systems as well, and not through simple jamming. Whoever infiltrated the compound either made use of a backdoor or a very advanced hacking system."

This meant that whoever snuck inside the compound and inspected their personal belongings must have been dispatched by a powerful organization!

A question quickly popped into mind. "How did you find out? If the intruder is so sophisticated, then they wouldn't have left any tracks behind."

"You're correct. The precautions I left behind have all been subverted." Leland shook his head in disappointed. "The only reason why the guards noticed something amiss was when a scuffle of sorts seemed to break out in one of our rooms. As best as we can tell, our intruder bumped into another intruder and erupted into hostilities!"

Ves blinked in astonishment. "So there's another? And they aren't friendly to each other?"

"There are many different powers in the Ylvaine Protectorate who don't like us." Leland stated. "Some of them don't get along with each other either. The only problem for us is that the intruders quickly left after exchanging some blows. They didn't leave any clues behind that could help us figure out their allegiances."

It could have been the Poxcos. It could have been the True Believers. It could have been the traditionalist mech designers. Any manner of interest groups could have infiltrated their compound.

This unexpected development made Ves believe that further trouble was afoot. The nature of the threat was so serious that Ves held a private meeting with Melkor.

After Ves explained some of the dangerous undercurrents he learned these past few days, Melkor didn't seem pleased.

"Why can't you be normal for once, Ves? I thought this business trip to the Ylvaine Protectorate was supposed to be a working vacation."

Ves tiredly rubbed his face. "I underestimated the extent of political tension in the Protectorate. I thought that since everyone here shares the same faith, that they would all get along with each other. The truth is much less optimistic than I thought."

The political conflicts in the Ylvaine Protectorate wasn't any different from the Bright Republic. In fact, the insertion of faith polarized the differences even more!

Melkor patted his cousin's back. "It's not that bad. You're surrounded by a considerable amount of Protectors of the Faith. The Curin Dynasty seems to be sincere in wanting to cooperate with you. With that many mechs and troops following you around, nobody should have any ideas about attacking you directly."

That was true. Even if someone ran through their luggage, what could they do? It was just a bunch of clothes and other miscellaneous possessions. The most important gear such as the custom suits of armor bought from Renny's Outfitters were stowed on Melkor's personal Crystal Lord so that they would always be within reach to their owners.

They continued to discuss some matters about their security arrangements, but there was very little they could do. Melkor already brought all the Avatars of Myth that he could spare.

Aside from hiring mercenaries, there was little they could do to bolster their protection.