

### Chapter 1181 Lonely Hear

Ves decided against hiring mercenaries or private security guards. Not only would their presence disturb the Protectors of the Faith, he also didn't know who to trust.

So far, his business trip to the Ylvaine Protectorate increased his sense of isolation. Despite staying in a bustling capital city of a moderately industrious planet, Ves felt very much alone, with only the companions he brought with him keeping him company.

The Ylvainans were not as friendly and open to foreigners as the Reinaldans. Not a lot of foreigners visited the Protectorate, so the locals here didn't have much experience in dealing with people who didn't share their culture and beliefs.

It was easy for people like Ves to feel detached from the locals due to all of the barriers in the way. Ves had no idea why Calabast wanted him to treat the Ylvaine Protectorate as his second home when he was so different from the average Ylvainan citizen. Just the differences in beliefs estranged him from Ylvainan society!

When Ves described some of his concerns over dinner at the compound later in the evening, Ketis snorted.

"You have us, right? You're never alone, Ves. Who cares what the Ylvainans think about us. It's their business if they don't like us. As long as they don't come up to us and punch us in our faces, they can think whatever they want."

"Maybe I'm being a bit too melodramatic." Ves admitted. "It's just that the culture shock is just beginning to dawn on me. It's incredibly awkward for us to be surrounded by Ylvainan believers while sharing none of their beliefs. It's like our presence is staining their perfect little paradise."

Gavin spoke up. "It's normal to feel this way. It takes a special kind of person to feel at ease in a completely foreign environment. The Ylvainans haven't been very welcome to outsiders like us as well."

The Ylvaine Protectorate consisted of a bubble that protected the local citizens from a galaxy that was largely hostile to their beliefs. Yet their isolation also coddled them, causing the Ylvainans to become unable to show much grace and hospitality to foreigners.

The problem was so extensive that Ves began to have second thoughts about furthering his business in this state.

He asked a deep question. "Do you think the Ylvainans deserve the opportunity to purchase our products?"

Everyone in the dining room fell silent. Melkor, Chette and Rhode didn't have much to say, since they were only mech pilots.

When Ves looked at Ketis, she spent more time on rubbing Lucky's back while he munched on a small bowl of exotics than thinking over his words.

"I still don't know why you're making such a big fuss about it." She said as she perceived his stare. "The galaxy is a big and weird place. Even if most humans look the same, they're completely different underneath their skin. As long as you have a comrade by your side, no amount of adversity can break you!"

Her words came out right from her heart at the end. How could she forget about the harrowing experiences on Aeon Corona VII and the deep frontier? They had jumped straight into one of the most perilous places in the Faris Star Region but managed to keep up their spirits because they enjoyed the company of fellow Vandals and Swordmaidens!

A small realization dawned upon him. "You're right. Having friends and family alongside me is like carrying a piece of home with me. As long as we all enjoy

each other's company, we will never become engulfed by this foreign environment!"

He spoke this not for himself, but for all of them! Ves shouldn't be the only person present here who felt unwelcome in the midst of the Ylvainans.

The locals couldn't be blamed for their cold and uncertain attitudes towards foreigners. Once the Protectorate began to open up its borders, their attitudes would likely shift as they came more and more in touch with visitors from other states.

"Speaking of loneliness, when will you get a girlfriend, Ves?" Melkor asked, interrupting the comfortable silence.

Ves almost spurted out a mouthful of tea. "That's none of your business!"

"On the contrary. It's everyone's business." The Avatar Commander retorted. "You're one of the most pivotal members of the Larkinson Family right now. Even if you don't spend much time at the Larkinson Compound, everything you do reflects back on our family and your business. Some of the elders of the family even contacted me and asked whether you'll be getting married soon."

It made sense that the Larkinsons paid attention to his love life. The family always placed a lot of attention on relationships, especially after a war. This was the perfect time for a Larkinson to settle down and have kids!

To Ves, the issue of marriage became especially pertinent. The continuity of the LMC after his death or retirement depended heavily on whether he could raise a competent successor.

While it wouldn't be too difficult for him to find an external successor to take over the LMC, the Larkinsons did not want to hand over their crown jewel to someone outside of the family.

It would be best if his children or another Larkinson mech designer could take over the business after Ves moved on! Even if such an event wouldn't take place for a century or more, the Larkinsons were already starting to grow concerned!

Gavin's mouth curled into a sly grin. "With your status and fame, you can get almost any girl you want, you know."

"Shut up, Benny."

During the discussion, Ketis bent down her head and held Lucky closer to her body. Whatever her thoughts on the issue, she didn't wish to draw any attention for now.

"Look, what are you waiting for, Ves? The war is over and you're a free man. Even if you are busy with your work, that doesn't mean you should neglect your other responsibilities. It is the duty of every man to find a partner for life!"

The company's motto took a different meaning at this moment.

"I don't see you hanging around with girls, Melkor."

"That's because I'm still young."

"I'm just as old as you. If you can take your time, so can I. My lifespan is almost 200 years. I can afford to wait."

"That's no reason for you to wait. I'm different than you, Ves. The Larkinsons don't care about my descendants. You're different because the family expects at least one of your kids to take over what you've started."

"I can train other Larkinsons into competent mech designers." Ves compromised. "I'm open to the possibility as long as they do well in their studies."

Melkor shook his head. The surface of his visor glinted in the light of the dining room. "That's not the same and you know it. The amount of attention

you put into training other Larkinson mech designers will never match the effort you put into raising your own children into following your footsteps! Also, you're the only Larkinson who has broken the mold. As the first exceptional Larkinson mech designer, the Larkinson Elders back at Rittersberg expect that your kids will all inherit at least some of your talent in mech design."

There was no such thing as that to Ves. He attributed most of his initial success to the Mech Designer System. Even though he transformed his body many times which turned his genes into something exceptional, the question whether he still retained the ability to conceive children remained a mystery.

One of the downsides to extensive genetic modification was that many people lost the ability to conceive children naturally! Only through the help of geneticists and other specialists would they be able to have children.

Ves coughed. "I'm too busy with my career right now to look for a girlfriend."

"That's rich, coming from you." Melkor snorted. "Didn't you just tell Madame Cecily that her bodyguards should live their lives? The same applies to you. What's the meaning of chasing after wealth and power when you don't have anyone to share them with? If you take away your company and your mech design abilities, is there anything left?"

That question completely stumped Ves. Although he had led a more diverse life than just designing mechs, he couldn't help but admit that his life revolved around it. He didn't have a hobby worth mentioning and he didn't really have any close friends and family he could share his joys with aside from maybe Ketis and Lucky.

Having realized the significance of living a full life, Ves could no longer deny that he was very negligent in diversifying his life.

The reason why he still possessed a strong degree of Spirituality despite his one-dimensional life was due to other reasons. Perhaps his mother imparted

her strength in this area to him when he was born. Perhaps the System induced a change in him. Perhaps the Heavenly Flower he ate during the Groening Mission kickstarted its explosive growth.

Yet all of those possible reasons entailed growth through external means. Rather than continue to rely on outside factors, Ves would be much better served if he could grow his Spirituality through his own efforts.

The key to that would be to follow his own advice and live a more multifaceted life.

Ves tiredly released a breath. "Alright. Maybe it's about time for me to find a girlfriend. Now is not the time, though. We're far away from home and surrounded by Ylvainans."

"Who knows if you fall in love with an Ylvainan. Some of them are quite attractive." Gavin teased. "For example, isn't Madame Cecily a big fan of you? She's quite pretty and she's very high birth. The two of you are a match made in heaven!"

Ves stared daggers at Gavin. "Please don't sully our employer. There's nothing going on between us."

The thought of hooking up with someone as shady as Calabast simply didn't register in his mind. While she looked gorgeous, that didn't mean much since almost every woman underwent a couple of procedures to make them look better. Finding an ugly woman in modern society was as rare as finding an expert pilot among a crowd of mech pilots!

"Hmm, on second thought, it will be hard to marry an Ylvainan without converting to their faith."

Citizens of the Bright Republic grew up with a considerable predisposition against religion. Every secular state didn't look too kindly on religion. They had

a strong interest in suppressing any interest towards religion because their spread threatened their sovereignty and identity!

If the Bright Republic became more open to the Ylvainan Faith, then what was there to stop the believers from merging the formerly-secular state with the Ylvaine Protectorate?

The separation between state and church didn't exist!

"So what's your type, Ves?" Melkor asked. "Are you into other mech designers?"

Ves shrugged, no longer willing to think so hard on this issue. "It helps. I think the most important quality is trust. As long as I feel comfortable enough with someone to share my secrets, I can see myself sharing the rest of my life with such a person. What's the point of marriage if you can't trust your significant other?"

This was why he couldn't imagine marrying someone like Calabast despite all the advantages such a union offered. She was obviously an exceptional individual who was more than qualified to be a partner in his rise to prominence.

Yet despite knowing more about Ves than any other person in the galaxy, he could never bring himself to open up his heart to her. Calabast was a very calculative woman who never stopped regarding Ves as a treasure to be milked!

If Ves ever wanted to hook up with someone, she should at least be someone he could feel at ease.

His eyes drew towards Ketis for a moment but didn't linger there.

"Why is love so complicated?" He mused.

"It's because you can't design it like you design your mechs. You have to find it on your own."

### Chapter 1182 Church and State

The next day, Leon arrived at the compound to take Ves and his entourage to the Grand Church of the Grey Martyr. The purpose of this visit was to expose each of them to the Ylvainan Faith.

When they stepped out of the shuttle, they all admired the tall structure.

Its architecture conveyed an immense amount of grandeur!

While sculptures and depictions of Prophet Ylvaine was all over the place, much of the facade featured another robed figure with a very characteristic long beard.

"That's the Grey Martyr?" Ketis curiously asked as she adjusted her poofy beret on her head. "He sure looks like the part."

Leon smiled generously. "The Grey Martyr is the oldest of the Martyred Followers. He was already old when Prophet Ylvaine rose up in the galactic heartland. Before receiving the prophet's enlightenment, he was just an ordinary man. Among the rest of the Martyred Followers, he is the least exceptional among them. He's older, less educated and lived the most plainest life imaginable in that part of space."

"What makes him so special then that he's revered as the Grey Martyr?"

"Good question." Leon replied with a smile. "The Grey Martyr is a simple man who is blessed with a gift for teaching. It is not a secret that while our prophet has made a lot of predictions, they are very difficult to comprehend. The Grey Martyr took it upon himself to compile the words of the prophet and condense them into easily-understandable pamphlets and books. The Ylvainan Faith spread a lot faster among the commoners due to his vital efforts!"



Anyone who attempted to read the words of Prophet Ylvaine would quickly descend into confusion! Much of what he said was dense and obscure at best, but no different from the sayings of a madman at worst!

For someone to sift through this difficult material and translate them into plain words took a huge amount of effort!

"This Grey Martyr must have the patience of a god." Gavin remarked.

Leon didn't take offense at the implied insult. "That is why many Ylvainans believe he is already standing by Prophet Ylvaine's side. Each of the Martyr has distinguished themselves in some way that has earned our admiration."

The group attracted a lot of attention from the church goers who entered the grand church in order to attend the upcoming service. The mechs and armored security guards surrounding them couldn't be hidden.

Ves spoke up while they were approaching a smaller side entrance into the church. "I heard that there's a cathedral in Krent that's even larger than this place. Why didn't you take us there?"

"The cathedral is a magnificent place of worship." Leon replied with an admiring breath. "It's the best place to experience the splendor of our faith. However, you wouldn't learn as much there. The Grand Church of the Grey Martyr is devoted to understanding. Outsiders like you are best served by learning from the Grey Martyr first."

That made sense. The Grey Martyr may not have been an exceptional person in life, but his simple outlook on life was of great help to Prophet Ylvaine in spreading his teachings to the masses.

Once they entered the church, they entered a tall and expansive hall of the grand church. Worshippers constantly entered from the main entrance and took their seats.

The light was dim and the hall was cast in shadow and darkness. Much of the interior was lit with traditional candles which weren't as luminous as modern lighting systems.

The traditional-looking interior looked like something out of a history book. If not for some modern touches here and there, Ves might have mistaken this church from a relic of humanity's pre-space history!

"You know, the style of this church reminds me of those of another faith." Ves remarked.

Leon didn't deny the accusation hidden in those words. "We cannot deny that our architects have taken inspiration from other sources. We do not see that as something to be shameful about. They say that all space lanes leads to Terra. It is the same with the matter of our faith. All of us are connected by a common thread. Just because someone follows a different faith does not mean we should reject them as a fellow brother."

Ves spotted a loophole in this convoluted argument. "What about the Star Worshipers?"

"They are heretics who trample upon our most core beliefs!" Leon replied vehemently. "The Star Faith is completely incompatible to us. They do not acknowledge the existence of any transcendent existences except for their supposed 'stellar gods'. If you ask me, they are merely deifying immense balls of plasma in space. As amazing as it to contemplate the sheer might of stars, they are lifeless objects incapable of thought! To mistake them as gods and reject the Time of Ascension is the greatest affront to the Ylvainan Faith!"

The heated emotion in Leon's voice startled Ves and the others. The Ylvainans really didn't like the Star Worshipers!

The core tenets of their respective faiths couldn't be reconciled.

The Ylvainans all believed that every form of life would one day receive the opportunity to transcend their mortal existence. Every human and alien was worthy of grace and redemption!

The Star Worshipers possessed a very different outlook. They regarded the Stellar Gods as tyrannical existences that needed to be placated all the time. None of them ever dared to think that they could become equals to the Stellar Gods. The mere thought of it was blasphemy to the highest order!

The inherent contradictions between their respective faiths exacerbated the tensions between the Ylvaine Protectorate and the Star Faith Collective. This was the consequence of making the church and the state one and the same! Because there was no distinction between the two, what could have been a harmless argument escalated in a conflict that already led to a considerable amount of deaths!

The worst part about it was that there was no way for either states to back down. Both of them needed to prove their devotion to their faith by defending their principles to the death if necessary!

This was why the reformers gained strength in recent times. If the Ylvaine Protectorate wanted to compete against the Star Faith Collective, then they needed to loosen the shackles that restricted their economic and industrial might!

Leon didn't take Ves and the others into the congregation of worshippers. Instead, he led them to a separate wing of the church that was served as a museum dedicated to the teachings of the Grey Martyr.

"Out of all the early followers of the prophet, the Grey Martyr is the one who is most involved with spreading our faith. Much of his work forms the core of the most widely-accepted interpretation. The Attendants of Ylvaine consider the Grey Martyr as one of their most important patrons due to this reason."

Each of them explored the wing of the church on their own. Due to the impending church service, no other visitors were allowed at the moment.

Ves went from display to display. Some of them held a rusted data pad or some scrap of carefully-preserved fabric where the Grey Martyr scribbled his interpretations.

Other displays held replicas of the gear worn by the Grey Martyr or scale models of the starships he traveled on. They also depicted what life was like before and during the First Calamity.

"The First Calamity is the most ruinous test that the Ylvainan Faith has ever lived through." Leon said with sadness. "Back when Prophet Ylvaine was still alive, we never intended to harm anyone. We spread our faith in peace and without any intention of upsetting the existing order. Yet fate is cruel and twisted the hearts of the leaders of the states where the faith was present. They all banded together and struck at our followers, slaying our prophet, exterminating his dynasty and turning his closest followers into martyrs!"

Ves tried his best not to show his skepticism. The history he learned in school in the Bright Republic painted a very different picture.

Supposedly, the Ylvainan Faith was very aggressive in its expansion. They not only took in willing believers, but also applied a considerable amount of coercion! Prophet Ylvaine was so insistent on expanding his faith that he wasn't afraid to offend the local powers!

Unfortunately, no matter how many people he converted, it was hard for the Prophet to withstand the military might of entire states! Faith alone wasn't enough to stop a laser beam from burning a hole through your head!

What he learned in school basically told him that the Ylvainans had it coming. If they weren't stopped, they would have eventually grown so powerful that

they could topple the secular governments of the states they operated in and found a new religious state in their place!

Of course, Leon probably hadn't been exposed to this less flattering version of the history of their faith.

"The First Calamity is the first great test of our faith. While Prophet Ylvaine has regretfully separated from us, his teachings still live on. The Ylvainan Faith has survived the First Calamity and the Great Flight to the Komodo Star Sector. Right now, we are in a period called the Long Recovery. While some believe that this period will last for a couple more centuries, others believe that the Second Calamity is looming closer and closer."

Ves garnered a guess of what that meant. "Are you referring to your conflict with the Star Faith Collective?"

"It is becoming increasingly clearer that the Ylvaine Protectorate and the Star Faith Collective cannot tolerate each other's existence." Leon declared. "Many Ylvainans fear that a war of annihilation is closer at hand than we like. This isn't like the cyclical wars your Bright Republic wages against the Vesia Kingdom every generation. The differences between us and the Star Worshipers are too great to contemplate peace. War is inevitable and neither side will lay down their arms until the other side has fallen into ruin!"

Ves and some of the others nearby looked a little disturbed. The Bright-Vesia Wars were already bad enough. However, neither side persisted after they exhausted their forces.

It sounded as if this wouldn't be the case in the conflict between the Protectorate and the Collective! Once they began to fight, neither side wanted to stop!

The timing of this looming conflict couldn't be any worse. Just when the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom laid down their arms against each other in

preparation for a greater threat, the two religious states were gearing themselves up for what looked like an extremely destructive war!

Eventually, Ves shrugged. Even if the Ylvainans and the Star Worshipers were about to slaughter each other, the LMC could sell a lot of mechs during this conflict!

While the state militaries played the leading roles, many private mech forces still contributed to the war effort in their own ways. The demand of mechs would continue to increase as the war became more heated.

A glint appeared in his eyes. Selling his mechs to the Ylvaine Protectorate would be very lucrative in this case. If he managed to sell his mechs to the Star Faith Collective as well, he'd be able to rake in twice as much money!

He quickly dashed his hopes. The LMC would likely incur a backlash if it became too brazen in trying to profit from both sides. If Ves wanted to sell his mechs to the Star Faith Collective, he should at least do so in disguise.

An idea quickly came to mind. Should he fake another identity in order to gain entry in the Collective's mech market?

He shook his head. It was way too convoluted to maintain separate identities. Although the Star Faith Collective's mech market should be a lucrative place to do business, it wasn't worthwhile for Ves to pay particular attention to it unless he gained a strong advantage.

Still, Ves couldn't help but become intrigued at the possibility of seeing his mechs in battle against each other.

### **Chapter 1183 Moneys Worth**

Ves appreciated the Grand Church of the Grey Martyr. Its museum and teaching wing gave visitors an intimate impression of the Grey Martyr and the early days of the Ylvainan Faith up until the end of the Great Flight.

He knew that the displays and accompanying texts deliberately glossed over the less flattering aspects of the faith. The Attendants of Ylvaine shaped a narrative that inspired both existing believers and nonbelievers.

Obviously, even if the Ylvaine Protectorate gave up on trying to convert the whole galaxy to their faith, they never let go of their dream to spread their faith. Prophet Ylvaine explicitly commanded his followers to do so in many occasions.

Reality trumped the commandments of their holy prophet. With the current strength of the Protectorate, they wouldn't even be able to convert a single neighboring state! Embarking on a grand crusade would only lead to a swift end to the state and the extermination of their entire faith!

Therefore, even if the Ylvainans still upheld the mission to spread the faith in their hearts, the Attendants of Ylvaine did their best to divert attention from this aspect.

The Ylvainan Faith needed to be spread, but the prophet never mentioned a deadline. Perhaps the Ylvainans could embark on their mission a few thousand years later. There wasn't any hurry, right?

Ves also gained a better understanding of why the Ylvainan Faith rose up in the first place. The First Calamity happened during the hectic end of the Age of Conquest. Prophet Ylvaine emerged as a figure of hope. Even as entire planets full of people got blown up left and right, the prophet foresaw an end to chaos and the beginning of a new order.

It was too bad he didn't live to see the transition to a new age. The rise and fall of the Ylvainan Faith was just one of many extreme events that occurred during this time of turmoil. The faith should count their luck that the three leading dynasties managed to ferry the remnants to a new home close to the edge of the galaxy.

Leon drifted over to Ves. "I hope the displays have given you to a closer understanding of our faith. Do you have any questions about what you've seen?"

"Yeah. How can you reconcile with other faiths that believe in different gods?"

"That's a complicated question." Leon shrugged. "We do not necessarily reject the beliefs of every faith. Truth to be told, there is a lot of overlap. We merely believe the perspective of many other faiths are too constrained around a limited range of godlike entities. They may believe that their gods are omnipotent and omniscient, but what is the meaning of our existence to live under such a powerful entity? We might as well be simulated AIs living in a virtual bubble of reality."

"So you reject that gods are all-powerful because you believe in the self-determination of humans?"

"Not just humans. All life." Leon smiled in a benevolent manner. "We are infinitely diverse, and each of our lives are meaningful. The gods who others believe are the beginning and end of everything are not as supreme as they thought. They are merely one of many transcendent existences who have cultivated some fans."

This was like demoting the image of a god from the CEO of a company into a middle manager. The Ylvainan Faith believed that there were even greater entities than the gods that other faiths worshipped.

The other religions probably wouldn't be able to control themselves if they met an Ylvainan who devalued their gods.

Still, Ves became a little uneasy for a moment. Some parts of Leon's explanation resonated with his own perspective on life. While he had no intention to convert to the Ylvainan Faith, he found it odd that he actually agreed with some of its beliefs.



"The church service is about to start." Leon said after checking the time on his comm. "We would be glad if you could attend it, though I understand if you do not wish to be present."

"You don't mind letting non-believers inside the main hall?"

"How can we spread the faith if we close the doors to our churches?" Leon smiled. "You'll be placed away from the locals, so they won't be disturbed by your presence."

Upon his invitation, Ves, Lucky, Ketis, Gavin and a handful of bodyguards climbed up to the upper floor and sat down at a raised balcony. An opaque electronic screen allowed the occupants some measure of privacy while still giving them a commanding view over the main hall and the dais.

A solemn but inspiring service commenced. Ves and the others observed without saying anything. The Grand Church of the Grey Martyr was a place of worship that emphasized the past and the fundamental lessons that could be learned from that time. A lot of families brought their children along in order for them to gain a better understanding of the faith.

A sense of peace and serenity fell on Ves. The Grand Church was so immense that it easily housed a hundred-thousand believers. To gather so many devout worshippers in a single place inevitably sparked a strange reaction.

Ves could sense a faint communal thread connecting every believer to each other. Under the guidance of the priests and the singers, the thoughts of each Ylvainan aligned with each other. While none of them were individually strong, the quantity of people nonetheless produced a remarkable phenomenon!

Just as Ves closed his eyes in order to attune his spiritual senses, Lucky suddenly jerked up from his lap!

"Meow!"

"What is it, Lucky?"

"Meow-meow!"

"There's danger?"

"Meow!"

"Damn!"

Leon and everyone else noted their strange behavior.

"What's wrong, Mr. Larkinson?"

"According to Lucky, we're in deep danger! There is a lot of movement outside the grand church! I'm afraid they aren't here to chat! We should evacuate the grand church and get to safety?"

Ketis already jumped from her seat and entered battle mode. Gavin glanced around with a clueless face. Leon still remained skeptical. How trustworthy was this mechanical cat? Isn't it just an artificial pet?

Just then, something happened in the main hall. Someone rose up from the middle of the congregation and shed his robe.

"Prophet Ylvaine lives, and he has spoken!" The rabid man announced, interrupting the ongoing sermon. His voice had been amplified through unknown means that allowed him to command the attention of everyone in the grand church! "A great blasphemer has entered this holy place! He sits above you all, plotting to corrupt your devotion to our prophet!"

How could the Grand Church lack security? Before the crazy man could say anything else, a ceiling mount zapped the man into paralysis. A team of security guards quickly pressed through the disturbed crowd and took the man away.

Yet at this time, a woman at the rear of the main hall stood up and shed her robes as well. She pointed an accusing finger in the air. "The great blasphemer is the herald to our doom! His presence in our state is the Second Calamity that our prophet foretold! A crisis of faith is at hand!"

A nearby turret attempted to zap the woman, but suddenly turned offline! Someone tampered with the security systems!

Fortunately, a team of guards quickly moved in to stun the woman and pack her away, but then a third person stood up and pointed his finger in the same direction!

That direction happened to be pointing straight at Ves on the raised balcony!

"Heed our prophet's warning! The great blasphemer has come to corrupt our faith and blacken our hearts! He has donned the guise of a mech designer and is planning to seduce us by dazzling us with his impure mech designs!"

As the third individual got taken care of, a fourth person stood up. "The great blasphemer is a foreigner whose sole purpose here is to break the Ylvainan Faith and destroy our Protectorate! He has taken the guise of a Brighter named Ves Larkinson! Do not be fooled by his innocent facade! He is a great demon who spreads his lies with a forked tongue barbed with thorns!"

This time, Ves became particularly alarmed. This plot was aimed squarely at him! "Trouble is in the air! Leon, find a way for us to evacuate! Guards, give me my armor!"

The guards that accompanied the entourage handed over a pair of metallic cases to Ves and Ketis.

Both of them unlocked their cases, causing them to expand and fold out until they both encompassed their bodies!

The process only took a few seconds!

Along with the weapons they carried, both Ves and Ketis instantly transformed from easygoing mech designers into deadly warriors! The sudden transformation stunned Leon and Gavin! Were they really mech designers?

Ves paid huge fortune to acquire the Sparous Vize and gift the Rising Red Dragon to Ketis. Only now did he begin to get his money's worth!

He already held his Peaceful Repose in his hands, though he kept the safety on due to all the guards and people in the way.

Ketis hesitated whether she should draw her greatweapon. Eventually, she opted to keep her weapon sheathed behind her back while she pulled out the Udor, her custom laser pistol. The brutal-looking weapon gave her a very dangerous air that added to the intimidation factor of her imposing red combat armor!

In the meantime, just as the fourth individual was subdued, a fifth person stood up and pointed at Ves! For some reason, the electronic screen that obscured his presence fizzled out, causing most of the congregation to get a good view of Ves and Ketis wearing strange combat armor while wielding their deadly pistols!

"Look upon the great blasphemer and his horned attendant! Look upon him and remember his appearance, for he is the greatest enemy of our faith! His hands are stained with the blood of innocents and his engines of destruction will reap the lives of an untold number of Ylvainans!"

The ground suddenly shook as shockwaves buffeted from outside! A battle erupted outside the Grand Church, and from the scale of disturbances, Ves immediately concluded that mechs were involved!

"For the good of the Ylvainan Faith, our living prophet has declared that every faithful Ylvainan must slay the great blasphemer before he poisons our hearts and minds! Do not be deceived by the promises of reform! Resist the

temptation of greed and affirm your faith in our prophet! Break the hypnotic spell that this great demon has cast over you! For the true prophet! For the Ylvaine Dynasty!"

The latest madman and all the other crazies who spoke up suddenly blew up! The explosion was so intense that not only the surrounding guards, but a large amount of people in the vicinity got caught up in the explosions!

Hundreds of Ylvainans died! Even more sustained severe injuries!

Screams rang throughout the main hall and panic ensued among the local folk. People jumped from their seats and ran towards the exit, but the hasty flight caused plenty of people to trip and fall only to be trampled by the feet of their fellow Ylvainans!

All the while, the security systems that could have suppressed the stampede or taken out the troublemakers failed to take effect!

The explosions might have stunned Gavin and Leon, but Ves, Ketis, Lucky and the guards didn't stand still. They immediately began to exit the gallery and move towards an emergency exit!

"I-I-It's the True Believers!" Leon stammered as a guard dragged him forward. "They're aiming at you, Mr. Larkinson! I can't believe it! The New Ylvaine Dynasty has always been brazen, but launching an attack in the middle of the Grand Church of the Grey Martyr during a service is sheer madness!"

"It doesn't matter who's attacking us. We need to get out of here!" Ves said through his helmet.

"Ah, yes! There's an underground emergency exit not far away from here! It's just around the corner and up ahead!"

They all ran around the corner accompanied by many other important Ylvainans who were privileged enough to sit above the main hall. Each of

them suddenly halted as they reached the entrance to the underground escape tunnels.

"The emergency exit is blocked!"

A series of explosions blew up the entrance and a large section of tunnels! The True Believers didn't want anyone to get away!

"All the other emergency exits are blocked as well!"

Panic quickly spread among the Ylvainans. They were trapped inside the church!

#### **Chapter 1184 True Fanaticism**

Leland's warning proved prophetic. The New Ylvaine Dynasty was one of the most notorious terrorist groups in the Protectorate. Under the leadership of their insane incarnation of Prophet Ylvaine, they didn't hesitate to kill their fellow Ylvainans in order to further their cause!

Right now, the Grand Church of the Grey Martyr lost its peace and serenity in the most awful way possible! A lot of locals already died due to the suicide attacks, and many more perished due to the subsequent stampede!

The worst part about it was that once the Ylvainans passed through the enormous main doors, they instantly became swept up by a battle between giants.

The True Believers hid numerous mechs throughout Krent and deployed them at the same time!

Even though the Protectors of the Faith maintained a strong guard presence around the grand church, a fifth of them suddenly turned against their comrades!

The treacherous Protectors stabbed their unsuspecting comrades in the back, disabling a substantial number of guard mechs right at the start!

This sneak attack not only affected the mechs, but also the footsoldiers! Random Protectors wearing combat armor or exoskeleton armor began to mow down both the masses and their fellow Protectors!

Total chaos ensued as Protectors fought against Protectors! While the traitors numbered fewer in number, they blended in so well that the loyalists constantly hesitated whether they should fire on their own!

As confusion and slaughter ensued around the grand church, the Avatars of Myth parked outside the church immediately adopted a defensive posture.

Commander Melkor tried to make sense of the confused situation. With Protectors fighting against Protectors, they were faltering in their attempts to fend off the mechs pouring in from the periphery!

With Ves and the others stuck inside the church, Melkor quickly knew what he had to do. He immediately issued his orders to Rhode Larkinson and the other Avatars in his squad.

"Leave the Protectors of the Faith alone as best as you can! Try not to fire back at them unless they focus their fire upon us! Our armor can take the potshots!"

"What should we do then, commander?!" An Avatar who piloted a Blackbeak asked.

"I want a Blackbeak in the rear to cover any attacks from rogue Protectors. As for the rest, take out the approaching unknown mechs! Make sure to check their transponder IDs first before you attack! They might be our reinforcements instead!"

Although the Avatars of Myth lacked combat experience, the quality of their mechs more than made up for it! The Ylvaine Protectorate wasn't as prosperous as the Bright Republic. The Protectors of the Faith simply couldn't afford to equip all of their rear garrisons with expensive mechs!

Therefore, the combat performance of the Avatars of Myth immediately overshadowed that of the surrounding Protectors!

With Melkor in the lead, the Crystal Lords fired continuous lasers at the approaching mob of insurgent mechs. The ramshackle mechs all stumbled from the ferocious barrage of lasers!

"This is easy!" A Crystal Lord pilot boasted. "The enemy mechs are all crap!"

"Pipe down and check your fire!" Melkor immediately rebuked the fellow.

"Even if the enemy mechs are garbage, there are more than a hundred of them converging on the grand church! Don't attack them carelessly! Aim high or low and make sure that you don't hit anything but the ground or air if you miss! We can't afford to inflict any collateral damage!"

The awful part about this chaotic attack was that it took place in the middle of Krent! The capital city of Kesseling VIII housed millions of citizens, and Melkor couldn't imagine how many people in or around the church already got caught up in the fighting!

With so many mechs pulled into battle, the collateral damage was already ruining the exterior of the grand church as well as the rest of the densely-populated city district! The energy screens installed in the vicinity were barely active for a dozen seconds before they all broke due to the sheer amount of firepower thrown in their way!

Nowhere was safe! Many underground evacuation tunnels collapsed and any shuttle or aircar that attempted to fly away was shot down by one of the many insurgent mechs!

While the mechs deployed by the True Believers assaulted the grand church, they weren't shy about sowing as many deaths as possible along the way! Their trigger discipline was nonexistent and their aim frequently strayed



towards office buildings, residential apartments, schools and other places filled with terrified Ylvainans!

The True Believers deliberately inflicted as much collateral damage as possible!

"Crazies!" Rhode Larkinson cursed. "How can they be so heartless as to slaughter their fellow Ylvainans?!"

"You're a fool if you expect any compassion from terrorists." Melkor replied while he carefully aimed the compact laser rifle of his Crystal Lord. "Watch your aim and don't descend to their level. If we accidentally kill even one innocent Ylvainan, we'll never hear the end of it! We can't bring any further trouble to Ves!"

Ever since the first sign of trouble erupted, he attempted to hail Ves, only to fail due to all of the jamming in the way. The True Believers prepared their attack well!

However, after numerous attempts, Melkor finally managed to open a weak connection! The Sparous Vize worn by Ves was an exceptionally expensive suit of combat armor and possessed a strong communication system!

"What's going on outside, Melkor?"

"It's bad! Some of the mechs of the Protectors of the Faith have turned traitor! We're getting swamped by a hundred enemy mechs!"

"Are you able to hold out?"

"The enemy mechs are numerous but weak." Melkor stated. "However, there's so many of them that it will take a lot of time to repel them. I don't advise you to step outside!"

"Damn! The underground evacuation tunnels have all been collapsed as well! There's no other way out!"

Both of them concluded that Ves had no choice but to hole up in the church and pray it didn't collapse over his head!

While a destructive mech battle raged on the streets, the interior of the church descended into hell! With the security and monitoring systems offline, it was impossible to pacify the panicking crowd of Ylvainans!

To their credit, none of the security guards turned traitor. However, they all had their hands full when random crazies popped out among the crowds and began to fire their weapons at the guards regardless of how many innocents were in the way!

Bodies dropped to the floor by the hundreds as a surprising amount of True Believers opened fire!

While most of the fanatics wielded basic weapons that barely dented the armor of the church guard, a small number of them employed heavier weapons that posed a serious threat!

The preoccupation of the church guard meant that they didn't have the manpower to spare to protect the bystanders caught up in the fighting. The reluctance of the guards to hurt the innocent hampered their attempts to take out the terrorists quickly!

During this time, Ves, Ketis and Lucky all entered battle mode. As the previous outbursts had already suggested, the main target of this large-scale attack happened to be them! Shortly after they found out that the emergency exits had been collapsed, a large mob of fanatics wielding an assortment of weapons barged in and began to fire their weapons wildly at Ves!

The Protectors of the Faith dispatched by Madame Cecily did their jobs and protected Ves and his companions from the attacks. They surrounded them and deployed mobile cover on the ground which unfolded thin, protective alloy barriers.

While they couldn't withstand a lot of heavy firepower, they nonetheless resisted the majority of the light caliber weapons wielded by the mob. For the moment, Gavin and Leon should be safe despite their lack of armor. Both of them huddled down to the floor and covered their ears against the noise of weapon discharges.

As for Ves and Ketis, both of them stood confidently in their respective combat armor.

"Just like old times, eh?" Ketis remarked in their private comm channel.

""Trouble always seems to find a way to haunt me." He sighed. "Don't move for now. There's nowhere else to go and our guard detail is doing a good job in repelling the mob."

Just as he said that, a large number of frantic fanatics pulled out grenades from their coats and threw them at his guard detail!

The combat armor worn by the Protectors of the Faith all activated their interception systems. Small laser mounts embedded into their armor bombarded the grenades with lasers.

While this function destroyed the vast majority of grenades before they arrived close to the defenders, a handful still slipped through and managed to detonate against the mobile barriers!

The ferocious explosions not only cracked some mobile barriers, but also injured the Protectors of the Faith huddling behind them! The grenades succeeded in creating some openings in the defensive envelope!

The crazy fanatics quickly fired their weapons through the gaps. Some of the shots even impacted the surface of the Sparous Vize and the Rising Red Dragon!

"Mr. Larkinson, get down!"

Ves casually waved his armored hand. "Weapons of this caliber won't pose a threat to me. You should worry about your own lives."

"Shall we test out our weapons?" Ketis asked with bloodthirsty eagerness. "I haven't killed someone in more than a year. I've missed this sensation!"

He glanced at her imposing armored form. "Don't shoot unless something dangerous comes up. I don't think this is the extent of the attack. The mob is barely even capable of killing heavily-armored Protectors of the Guard. If the True Believers truly wanted to kill me, they should know better than to throw some worthless bodies in my direction."

The True Believers sacrificed a lot of manpower and assets to launch a large-scale attack. Perhaps they spent a decade's worth of accumulation on Kesseling VIII to gather so many mechs and fearless fanatics!

Therefore, Ves, Ketis and Lucky each remained alert as they waited for the next shoe to drop.

They didn't wait long. As the mob of fanatics ran closer to makeshift defensive position, the thick and solid wall behind them suddenly collapsed!

A breach had been formed in a direction that every Protectors of the Faith assumed was safe!

As the dust and debris began to settle, a large group of fanatics armed with better weapons began to fire through the newly-opened gap!

A lot of Protectors of the Faith instantly fell into trouble as they became caught in a crossfire of attacks from multiple directions!

What was worse was that Ves and Ketis both became exposed to the attacks from the rear!

Ves and Ketis both came to the same decision and knelt to the ground.  
"Fight!"

Ves took careful aim and fired his Peaceful Repose through the gap. Currently, he loaded his custom ballistic pistol with a magazine filled with inferior Exil rounds. Each pull of the trigger expended 100,000 credits.

The expensive rounds left a blazing trail in their near-instant passage through the air. The powerful Exil rounds punched through the combat armor worn by the better armed and better equipped True Believers like butter!

Five True Believers fell from the first round alone as it passed through multiple bodies at once! As the Exil round lost almost all of its kinetic energy, it exploded in the body of its fifth victim, blasting the deluded fanatic's body into chunks of meat that were barely contained in his suit of combat armor!

While Ves carefully paced his shots in order to conserve his ammunition, Ketis shot her Udor with abandon!

The large, oversized laser pistol that looked like it belonged to a space barbarian barked out powerful laser beams that sliced through armored fanatics with ease! Ketis patched in her Udor into her Rising Red Dragon's targeting system, causing her to exhibit perfect accuracy!

Just as the attackers on the other side of the breach were almost wiped out, the stone ceiling above their heads suddenly collapsed!

"Ketis, cover Leon!" Ves yelled. "I'll cover Benny!"

Both of them threw their armored forms over their unarmored companions just as the rocks crushed down upon them all!

#### **Chapter 1185 Culpable**

The Grand Church of the Grey Martyr was an immense structure built out of a combination of stone and more advanced materials. This protected the grand church against attacks from mechs, but could prove deadly once the walls and ceilings were no longer held in place.

The rain of rocks and heavier alloys dropping over the entire group proved devastating to both the Protectors of the Faith and the mob of fanatics that attacked them! The sheer weight of them was far more than any individual could withstand!

Even the combat armor worn by the Protectors of the Faith failed to withstand the sudden rain of heavy debris! Many of them were outright killed, while those who endured less debris sustained severe injuries which their failing suits of armor desperately tried to treat!

As battle continued to rage elsewhere in the grand church, the collapsed section fell into a momentary lull of silence.

Half a minute later, a scuffed but intact armored form carefully dug out the pile of debris that settled on the ground floor. The Rising Red Dragon carefully held on to Leon who was trying to hold in his cries of pain while he held his broken and half-crushed arm.

"It hurts!"

"Shut up!" Ketis retorted as she abruptly dropped him onto the pile of debris.

"How can you Ylvainans allow your grand church to be attacked so brazenly?"

"I don't know! I never thought that the New Ylvaine Dynasty maintained such a huge presence on Kesseling VIII. It doesn't make any sense!"

Ketis didn't concern herself about Leon's mistaken assumptions. What mattered right now was surviving this attack!

"Stay put! I'm going to dig out Ves!"

She holstered her Udor and began to bend down and move aside the chunks over the spot where Ves last threw himself down to cover Gavin's body.

She used the superior mechanical strength of her Rising Red Dragon to remove the smaller pieces. As for the larger pieces, she unsheathed her greatsword and carefully sliced them up into manageable portions.

Five minutes passed by until she managed to form a small hole over the dented back of Sparous Vize.

"Are you still alive down there?" Ketis asked.

"Yeah." Ves replied as he awkwardly held his position. "Lucky helped me survive the collapse."

"Meow."

The cat crawled out from underneath his armor looking a lot less energetic.

At the moment when Ves threw his armored form over Gavin, Lucky flew above and used his energy claws to slice the largest chunks of debris! While Lucky's efforts didn't make a lot of difference, his efforts nonetheless prevented the Sparous Vize from getting overwhelmed.

As soon as Ketis dug aside enough debris, Ves carefully stood up. The Sparous Vize fared a lot worse than the Rising Red Dragon, but its quality nonetheless helped him avoid the same outcome of that of his guard detail.

His shield generator also helped take off the load during the initial impacts.

"We sure got our money's worth." Ves said as he helped Gavin stand up and climb out of the hole.

His assistant incurred a lot of trauma. His entire body shook and he had trouble maintaining his footing on the bed of debris.

"I thought we would die!"

As Leon and Gavin tried to come to terms to the ordeal they went through, Ves turned his attention to Lucky.

"Are there any other threats nearby, Lucky?"

"Meow."

"The fighting is already starting to die down?"

"Meow."

"No further threats are coming?"

"Meow."

"Okay, got it. Activate and maintain an ECM field over us to be sure. Maybe the True Believers will direct another wave of attackers at us if they think we survived the collapse of the ceiling.

"Meow!"

"I know you expended a lot of energy, but I'll make it up to you later! I'll ask for compensation directly from Madame Cecily!"

Ves felt awfully pissed at Calabast for overlooking the acute threat posed by the True Believers. She was supposed to be a spy! It was her job to be on top of these kinds of threats! How could she be so incompetent that she overlooked all the hardware and people the True Believers moved into place?

Obviously, her intelligence network wasn't up to snuff yet. Whoever fed her the information that the True Believers posed a negligible threat did a good job fooling Calabast.

Ves and Ketis moved Leon and Gavin over to a defensible position away from the collapsed ceiling. They huddled there under Lucky's ECM as the cat continued to cast his sensors in every direction.

The fighting in the main hall and outside the church started to die down. No further attackers approached their position.



Just fifteen minutes after the start of the attack, the Protectors of the Faith finally arrived at the grand church in force!

By then, the traitors among the mechs stationed at the church had already been eliminated. As for the attacking mechs that stormed the church in every direction, most of them had already been wrecked.

The Avatars of Myth did an exemplary job in fending off the attackers, taking out twenty of them with just a couple of Crystal Lords!

Once a large amount of Protectors on foot poured into the main hall of the grand church, they swept up the remnants of the fanatics with overwhelming force.

It was too late. Many innocent Ylvainans died from the crossfire, stampede and crushing debris. Large holes poked through the high ceiling of the church, illuminating the blood and bodies that littered the interior of the church.

As the primary target of this attack, the Protectors of the Faith dispatched commandos to Ves' last known position. Lucky dropped his ECM field at their approach, allowing them to detect the survivors.

"Mr. Larkinson! Come with us!"

The commandos forcefully took Ves, Ketis and the injured men away.

Hours later, Ves returned back to the headquarters of the Office of Strategic Mech Management. Right now, the entire Kesseling System was on high alert, so the headquarters currently hosted four times as many guard mechs!

The Avatars of Myth, fresh out of one battle, only took a short rest before piloting their mechs again. None of them were willing to take the chance that the New Ylvaine Dynasty already exhausted all of their assets on Kessling VIII.

"So, Calabast." Ves spoke as he sat in her office inside his dented armor. At this stage, he wasn't willing to relinquish his protection. "I recall you said something about the True Believers."

"I stand by my words, Ves." She said. "Just because the attackers talked like True Believers doesn't mean that they are actually the real thing. The attack came too abruptly."

Ves raised his eyebrow. "Are you trying to deny you're wrong?"

"Damnit, Ves! Don't be fooled by what took place on the surface! While the True Believers have never been the most rational terrorists, they would never be crazy enough to inflict death and destruction on this scale, especially to the Grand Church of the Grey Martyr!"

"What do you think actually took place, then?"

"I think another organization is responsible. It could be the traditionalists. It could be the Attendants of Ylvaine." Calabast pinched her head. "I'm pretty sure it's not the True Believers. It simply doesn't make sense."

"Prophet Ylvaine never made much sense."

Calabast frowned at Ves. "Whatever you think about the New Ylvaine Dynasty, they can't afford to alienate their grassroots support. While they've never shield away from civilian casualties, they have never shown this much disregard for collateral damage. This terrorist attack will set back their support by a huge margin."

They eventually moved on from this topic. Calabast seemed oddly adamant about sticking to her theories.

"What happens to me now?" Ves asked.

"I don't know. I will have to meet with the senior Curins to see what they have to say. They might want to pull the plug on your commission and send you back to the Bright Republic as fast as possible."

Ves furrowed his brows. "Won't that be giving in to the demands of the terrorists?"

"News of your involvement has already spread." She said and threw out a data pad that contained some articles she collected from the local news portals. "Even though you're a victim, the media has already begun to lay the blame on your feet!"

He skimmed through the headlines.

THE CAUSE OF THE ATTACK - VES LARKINSON IS A DANGER TO YLVAINAN SOCIETY

GO HOME VES! WE DON'T WANT YOU HERE!

TRUE BELIEVERS VOW TO CONTINUE THEIR ATTACKS UNTIL VES LARKINSON IS DEAD OR GONE!

"These are smear articles!"

"Many news portals published them soon after the first details of the attacks emerged." Calabast said. "The publications that acted the fastest are mostly aligned with the traditionalists and the Attendants of Ylvaine. Even though they state that the True Believers are the main culprits of the attack, the journalists are all trying to shift some of the blame on you. If you weren't in the Protectorate, the slaughter would have never taken place!"

Ves felt like puking blood. "That's victim blaming!"

"It's working. A lot of Ylvainans are getting swayed by these articles. You have to know that the Ylvainans have always been predisposed against foreigners. Public opinion is turning against your presence. Even some of the supporters

of the reform agenda are beginning to have second thoughts about your involvement."

All of these revelations began to look suspicious to Ves. "This smells like a plot, and a premeditated one at that."

Whether the True Believers were actually involved or not, at least one element of Ylvainan Society wanted him gone. They knew that as long as Ves succeeded in impressing the locals with his mechs, he'd be able to do a lot more business in the Protectorate, thereby advancing the reform agenda.

"Right now, my staff and I are working as hard as we can to keep the deal between us going." She said. "I've even called in some favors from my old employers to exert some influence on the decisions of the higher-ups. I've spent an enormous amount of social capital, you know."

"Am I supposed to be thankful? I don't even know who you worked for before you moved to the Protectorate!"

Right now, the situation seemed dire. Although Ves was glad he was able to retain his life and the lives of his comrades, his mood sank when he thought that all of his plans for the Ylvaine Protectorate were about to be ruined due to a targeted conspiracy against the reform agenda!

"Relax, Ves. The Curin Dynasty won't give up on us." Calabast said. "The only problem is that it will be difficult for us to proceed with our plans."

"Why so?"

"The traditionalists are trying to use this incident to convince the public that it isn't worth it to get in bed with foreign mech designers. They don't add much strength to the mechs sold in the Protectorate. In fact, their presence will only serve as magnets for further destructive terrorist attacks!"

This was plainly giving in to intimidation. Yet even though this opinion was starting to get a lot of sway among the Ylvainans, Ves nonetheless saw a glimmer of hope in this awful situation.

Ves began to smile. "I see. If that's the case, then the only way I can prove the traditionalists wrong is to design a great mech. As long as my mech strongly appeals to the Ylvainans, then the public will become convinced that it is more than worth it to work with a foreigner like me! My mech design will be my rebuttal!"

"Do you think it's easy to impress the skeptics among the Ylvainan population?" Calabast retorted. "The bar is raised now. There's a lot at stake. With so much public scrutiny over your work, it's not enough for you to meet the high expectations we've set on this project. If you truly want to win back enough support, you have to surpass everyone's expectations!"

"Calabast, if there is one thing I am confident about, it is my ability to design mechs. Just wait. In a few months, I'll convert every skeptic with my hero mech design!"

### **Chapter 1186 Retaliation**

The audacious terrorist attack on Kesseling VIII shocked the Ylvaine Protectorate. The news spread through the entire state in an instant, becoming the most talked about topic in the next few days.

The Grand Church of the Grey Martyr hosted many Ylvainans during the terrorist attack. Many more lived or worked in the city district affected by the battle between mechs. As the second-biggest church on Krent, the area around the grand church was one of the most desirable places to live and work! A lot of affluent and influential Ylvainans counted among the casualties!

Right now, casualty estimates exceeded 200,000 Ylvainans, and this figure climbed upwards every hour! At least a third of them had died while the rest sustained moderate to severe injuries.

It became clear that the True Believers deliberately aimed to inflict as many casualties as possible! Not only did they deploy a lot of fanatics who fired their weapons indiscriminately inside the church, but the cheap mechs they deployed all fired their weapons with wild abandon!

The True Believers could have never overwhelmed the defenses of the grand church. Even if the mechs of the Protectors of the Faith struggled against traitors in their ranks, the quality of their mechs and mech pilots exceeded that of the attackers by a large margin.

The Avatars of Myth distinguished themselves in this battle as well. Their contribution hastened the collapse of the opposing mechs and preventing them from sowing more death and destruction.

The New Ylvaine Dynasty must have known the cheap mechs they deployed wouldn't be able to win. It was already a tall order to defeat the Protectors of the Faith defending the church, but they could never hold their ground against the reinforcements sent from other strongholds in the city!

Therefore, Ves quickly figured out that the goal of this horrendous attack. Killing him was just an excuse. It would further the agenda of his opponents if he died, but even if he managed to survive, the purpose of the attack had already been fulfilled!

"The true reason for launching this attack is to malign the reform agenda!"

A war of public opinion ensued shortly after hostilities ended. News portals aligned with the traditionalists not only exaggerated the awful attack, they also cast the blame of the event on Ves and the reformers.

The way the traditionalists saw it, the reformers could have prevented this tragedy if they hadn't provoked the True Believers into attacking the foreign mech designer they invited to Kesseling VIII!

The momentum the reform agenda built up over the past few years grinded to a sudden halt due to this event!

The traditionalists, who always lost ground, suddenly regained their fire! They ardently stood up and defended the need to stick to their own customs! The Protectorate didn't need the help of foreigners to remain strong!

Currently, Ves looked out the window from the top floor of the guest compound. Hundreds of protestors gathered in front of the courtyard walls and jeered at the foreigners hiding inside.

"Go away, foreigners!"

"Ylvaine needs no help from you!"

"Drive out this evil blasphemer!"

The insults hardly affected his mood. As an increasingly public figure, Ves already became used to attracting hate.

Only two other people resided in the room right now.

Gavin looked like he had gone through hell. As a civilian, he had never faced a threat to his life before. Getting caught up in the middle of a major terrorist attack deeply affecting his psyche.

"Ves.." He said with a gulp. "It might be time to cut our losses. We aren't welcome here. All the propaganda published over the last few days has turned many Ylvainans against foreign influence and you specifically. With so much xenophobia directed against us, the LMC will never be able to get its feet off the ground in the local mech market. We've been kneecapped!"

Crossing his arms, Ves didn't reply, but his straight and unyielding posture already made his stance clear on the matter.

"The situation is getting increasingly more dangerous to us, Ves." Leland said. He hadn't been present at the grand church during the attack. "There are a lot

of forces converging on Kesseling VIII. My sources tell me that the hostile mechs used in the attack had all been shipped in piecemeal in the last couple months. That tells me that this action was both deliberate and premeditated."

"Do you believe that the True Believers are responsible?" Ves asked.

"Madame Cecily believes that another faction is responsible."

Leland shrugged. "It's difficult to say. The True Believers quickly claimed responsibility for the attack, but that doesn't mean much. They've been put into a difficult position if they aren't responsible. If they denied responsibility, then that would have painted them as weak and indecisive. That's not the style of their fake prophet."

Everyone here knew too little to make a solid judgement. So many interests were competing against each other that none of them knew where to go in order to seek revenge.

However, Ves already made a judgement on his own. "I think Madame Cecily has a point. Even if the motives of the attack aligns with the beliefs of the New Ylvaine Dynasty, they'd be stupid to alienate their popular support. Out of all the Ylvainan factions affected by this tragedy, only the traditionalists have come out as clear winners!"

"I would caution you not to come to a premature conclusion." Leland warned with a sharp gaze. "Sometimes, the most obvious answer is just a trap. Whoever launched this attack may have wanted to deepen the contradictions between reformers and traditionalists."

That caused Ves to raise an eyebrow. "Who would want that to happen?"

"I can name a few parties. The Star Faith Collective for example. The Star Worshipers will want to do everything possible to weaken the Ylvaine Protectorate. The more the Protectorate is wracked by internal division, the weaker they'll be when the inevitable war breaks out between the two states."



The idea sounded plausible, but Ves didn't want to go that far. "Let's leave the guessing to the authorities. It's not our job to hunt down the culprits."

"So you intend to press on?"

Ves nodded.

"Why?" Gavin nervously asked. "It's dangerous here! Just look at what has happened! If the attackers can launch one attack, they can launch another!"

"I acknowledge the risks, but it's not my intention to back down from this threat. The moment they aimed at our lives, it's no longer just about making money."

"What other reason is there that is worth braving all of this danger?" Gavin frowned.

They initially traveled to the Ylvaine Protectorate for business and profit reasons. Greed and the desire to expand the reach of his products drove Ves to participate in this venture.

Those reasons still applied. The only difference was they took a backseat to a greater priority.

Retaliation.

"It's personal."

Ves refused to take the easy road. Abandoning the commission and leaving the Protectorate with his tail tucked between his legs only furthered the interests of his opponents.

Perhaps he spent too much time on the frontier, but he simply didn't want to back down and show weakness!

Logic dictated that he should cut his losses. The Ylvaine Protectorate was just one of many states in the Komodo Star Sector. Why should he divert so much

time and effort into expanding the presence of his mech company in a state that didn't welcome him? He didn't owe anything to the Ylvainans!

Yet on an emotional level, Ves wanted to spite his enemies. Retaliating directly by attacking those responsible of the attack was impossible.

Therefore, the next best thing that he could do to spoil the plans of his enemies was to dazzle the Protectorate mech market with a fantastic mech design!

His pride as a mech designer demanded that he accept this challenge. Not only was it a good way to retaliate against the masterminds behind the attack, the pressure also motivated him to work at his best.

His principled stance also happened to resonate with his design seed.

This was important, because he suspected that his design seed played an intricate role in his future advancement. He called it a design seed because he felt that it was only the initial shape of things to come. There was so much raw potential locked inside the design seed, but hardly any of it had been revealed since its formation.

Anything he did that roused the activity of his design seed was worth contemplating.

"It's decided. I intend to stay." Ves declared. "However, that doesn't mean that everyone has to stay. Benny, if you don't feel safe anymore, I can send you back to the Bright Republic."

The suggestion did not sit well with Gavin. "I don't know, Ves. It feels like I'm turning my back on you when you need me the most. You still need someone by your side to manage your affairs."

"I can manage, I think. It's not as if you can't do most of your job by remote. I won't hold it against you if you want to return to safety."

While Gavin felt awfully tempted, he eventually shook his head. "None of the others are leaving. What would that make me if I'm the only one in your staff to depart? I don't want you to think less of me. I love my job. I'm very lucky to work for you in this capacity, even though you never call me by my actual name anymore for some reason. If an advisor like Leland has the guts to stay, then I should stick around as well!"

Oh, if he only knew the truth. Leland was anything but a civilian.

Regardless, Ves was pleased with Gavin's commitment. Only during times of difficulty would he be able to distinguish between true friends and fair-weather friends. He recognized that it took a lot of courage for Gavin to stay.

"I appreciate the support, Benny." Ves smiled sincerely at his assistant. "I'll be sure to compensate you with a generous bonus. Consider it hazard pay."

Gavin ruefully shook his head. "It's never been about the money for me. If you really want to reward me, then please call me by my real name."

"Sure thing, Benny."

Later on, Ves met with Ketis at a lounge in the compound. When she heard about his decision to stay and continue to work on the commission, she nodded as if she already knew he would make that choice.

"I knew you'd never back down!" Ketis chuckled. "We should teach the bastards who attacked us a very good lesson! By the time you're done with them, they'll regret waking the dragon!"

Ves tiredly sighed as he sat down on a couch next to Ketis. "It's easier said than done, though. Many Ylvainans are already predisposed against me and my products. If I want to shift public opinion, then I need to design a really fantastic mech. It has to be at least as great as the Aurora Titan!"

A lesser mech design wouldn't cut it anymore. Ves initially thought he could get away with a perfunctory design that was just as good as the Crystal Lord, but no more. He needed to impress the Ylvainans just like how he impressed the Brighters with his Aurora Titan!

Compared to last time, his ability to design a mech should have improved. As his latest Mastery experienced showed him, a Journeyman was a lot more capable in designing a mech than an Apprentice!

Yet all of these advantages couldn't make up for the fact that Ves didn't have access to the most critical ingredient!

If Ves wanted to match the grandeur of his Aurora Titan design, he needed to obtain a strong spiritual fragment that could empower his images and serve as the core of the design spirit of his upcoming design!

In order to obtain such a valued asset, he had no choice but to seek them out!

An audacious idea started to form in his mind. Which individual did the Ylvainans value the most?

### **Chapter 1187 Stubborn Streak**

The terrorist attack on the Grand Church of the Grey Martyr affected the entire Kesseling System. All the deaths and destruction disrupted a lot of trade and business transactions, sending the local economy to a nosedive.

A significant amount of scared Ylvainans abruptly moved away from Krent or Kesseling VIII, which further exacerbated the living conditions of those who remained.

The only reason the local economy hadn't crashed was because the Curin Dynasty pumped a lot of money into the star system. Their vigorous efforts helped prop up everyone's jobs and businesses, though only at great cost.

Even the most reform-minded Curins began to have second-thoughts about Madame Cecily Curin's decision to continue working with Ves. The reform

agenda took an awful hit due to her initiatives, making her even less popular among her erstwhile 'relatives'!

When Ves next met up with Calabast at her tightly-guarded headquarters, he encountered a lot of protestors and mechs.

An entire mech company of Protectors of the Faith had come out in force. Their presence deterred the protesters from taking any rash actions and also safeguarded the life of the most controversial Curin in the Kesseling System.

A lot of people didn't like the Director of Strategic Mech Management right now! She carried just as much blame for provoking the terrorist attack as Ves!

Due to the raised security levels, Ves had to go through numerous security inspections. He left everything including Lucky and his comm behind before the beefy guard presence allowed him to enter Madame Cecily's office.

"Ves." Calabast said with a slightly weary tone voice as soon as she activated her signal jammer. "I know I was supposed to introduce you to some local Ylvainan mech designers today, but there's a setback."

"What happened?"

"The Apprentices who initially expressed their interest in working with you have all decided to change their minds. They've canceled their appointments and left the Kesseling System as soon as possible. We tried to approach some other Novices and Apprentices to make up for their absence, but not a single Ylvainan mech designer we came in touch with has accepted our generous offers!"

Even though he faintly expected this reaction, Ves nonetheless grimaced.

"Mech designers are very risk averse when their lives are on the line. Ylvainan mech designers have never been exposed to danger, unlike the mech designers from my own state."

He didn't mention that most of Brighter mech designers still remained cowards anyway.

"The problem remains that no matter how much incentives I've offered, not a single Ylvainan mech designer thinks it's worthwhile to cooperate with us." Calabast sighed. She knew the score as well as anyone. "Every Ylvainan mech designer wants to maintain a good reputation in the Protectorate. Working with you will ruin their mech companies if they own their own businesses. Even if they don't, the taint they acquired from associating with you will mean that they won't have any hope of getting hired by an Ylvainan company."

Working with Ves had always been a gamble. Right now, the odds were stacked against him. The chance of success had plunged while the cost of betting on him increased to an unacceptable degree.

Mech designers always possessed a good mind for mathematics. Even a first-year mech design student could calculate odds. It didn't surprise Ves at all that every Ylvainan mech designer concluded that collaborating with him was a bad bet!

Still, that left both of them deprived of an essential asset. Without an Ylvainan mech designer to lend their credibility to the hero mech design, it was impossible for Ves to claim he designed an authentic Ylvainan mech!

The joint venture between him and Calabast also fell into an awkward place. Without a local mech designer to take the helm of the Living Mech Ylvaine Corporation, Ves wouldn't be able to advance his business agenda with regards to the Protectorate's mech market.

"Do we enjoy any support at all?" Ves asked.

"The most ardent reformers in the Protectorate still believe in the cause." Calabast replied. "We can count on their backing. The need to liberalize the

Protectorate's economy and revitalize its industry is still a priority to them. The sooner they can get this done, the better their chances of winning the war against the Star Faith Collective."

The fundamental division in Protectorate society was to what extent they needed to embrace change to survive the upcoming war. Relations between the Ylvaine Protectorate and the Star Faith Collective continually deteriorated to the point where war became more and more likely.

The initial skirmishes already revealed that the Protectors of the Faith couldn't keep up. Unlike their isolationist neighbors, the Star Faith Collective never closed themselves off from the rest of the galaxy. They embraced all the latests trends and their mech market was just as competitive as that of the Bright Republic.

The three leading dynasties of the Ylvaine Protectorate all read the signs. What they disagreed on was how they should address their shortcomings.

The reformers favored change. If their mechs weren't good enough to keep up with the machines deployed by the Star Faith Collective, then they should just change that by borrowing foreign help.

The traditionalists rejected that approach due to religious reasons. They believed that letting go of their principles and watering down their unique customs would distance the Protectorate from the Ylvainan Faith.

The most hardcore believers of the Faith believed that their piety should be enough to win against any opponent!

Thinking about the differences between the two factions prompted Ves to make an important realization.

"We don't need an Ylvainan mech designer."

"Pardon?" Calabast raised her eyebrows. "I've already told you that the Ylvainans can be quite xenophobic. Recent events magnified this tendency among the locals. We are even more dependent on local help than before!"

Ves resolutely shook his head. "I don't think so at all. Look at it this way. The entire point of the reform agenda is abandon older customs that hold back the strength of their mechs. The premise behind this idea is that the reformers recognize that their domestic mech designers are no good!"

"Although that's true, most reformers only seek modest changes. They don't want to upend every existing paradigms that make up an Ylvainan mech!"

"Change is necessary. Rather than pussy-footing around, why not be bold for once and take a leap? The traditionalists already hate us regardless of how much we try to accommodate their feelings. I think the time for compromise is over now."

"You're being reckless, Ves. There is always a need for compromise. While we both look down on the hardliners in the Protectorate, they comprise a good chunk of its total population. It's extremely unwise to aggravate your relations with them. Burning your bridges with them won't do you any good!"

A stubborn streak crept up within Ves. The more Calabast argued against his decision, the more he became convinced that he should stick to his stance!

"I've already decided, Calabast. I don't want to play by the rules of traditionalists anymore. I believe I can design an Ylvainan mech as well as any Ylvainan mech designer. I don't need their help."

Although the two of them disagreed on this matter, Ves wouldn't let Calabast have her way this time.

When it came to designing mechs, Ves always stuck to his principles!



After a ten-minute argument, Calabast shook her head in disappointment. "You mech designers are always touchy about your mechs. I really don't like the direction you're forcing us to take. You are taking unnecessary risks when there are safer alternatives available. If you give me some time, I can probably bribe a desperate-enough domestic mech designer to collaborate on your project."

"Don't bother. I don't want any help from unqualified mech designers with ulterior motives."

The meeting ended shortly after they held their contentious talk. All of the recent setbacks weakened Calabast's confidence. Her position in the government was constantly under threat and it took a lot of energy for her to maintain her current directorship. She could hardly spare the time to manage Ves.

For his part, Ves knew that he acted too willfully and impulsive for his own good. He received plenty of good advice, all of which he quickly set aside because he didn't want to give the traditionalists any satisfaction!

He recognized that he was being a lot more irrational than usual.

Perhaps it was because he never got over from his latest harrowing, life-threatening encounter. Ever since he came back from the ruined grand church, he never truly calmed down.

Was it a good idea for him to let his anger affect his decisions? No.

Did it feel good to let his emotions take the reins? Hell yes!

A strong drive to design a mech surged within his body. He was like a dormant engine that had slowly been roused to life. He was more ready to design a mech than ever before!

Ves always valued such an emotional state. His passion had been stoked. A strong sense of purpose drove him onward. All of these conditions increased his motivation to the highest degree possible.

As Ves returned to the guarded compound, he immersed himself in his passion in order to prepare himself for what was about to come.

"It's time to design my mech."

First, he should come up with a vision and mech concept. Calabast initially requested him to design a hero mech which could serve as her ceremonial bodyguard. The mech needed to fulfill both a ceremonial and practical function.

"The mech has to look great, feel great and perform great."

These requirements corresponded to the form, spirit and function of the mech. Ves possessed a good amount of confidence in both the form and function of his mech design.

Ves worried the least about the performance of his mech. As a Journeyman, as long as he spent enough time on his work, his mechs would never disappoint in this area.

Calabast already put an entire catalog of component licenses at his disposal and set a generous budget. This meant that Ves didn't need to worry too much about cost efficiency. It was fine if the hero mech surpassed the Aurora Titan in cost because Calabast only wanted six copies.

As for the form of his mech, Ves believed he observed enough Ylvainan mechs to emulate their characteristic visual style. He believed in his artistic skills. He was more than capable of emulating the look of Ylvainan mechs.

"I don't want to design a clone, though."

Ves wanted to introduce something new to the Ylvainan mech market. He didn't want to copycat their style just to blend in. He wanted to make a different statement with his work.

"I'm a foreigner anyway. Copying their visual style without possessing the heart for it will just lead to hollow imitations. That's not what I want to make."

When it came to art, integrity was important. It was too easy to copy another style, but whether the artist could make it their own was another matter.

Ves didn't feel too strongly about the Ylvainan visual style. While their mechs looked impressive and matched some of his own preferences, he wasn't an adherent to the Ylvainan Faith. This meant that his attempts to incorporate religious elements onto the external appearances of his mechs would always come off as insincere.

"I should put some more thought on this matter."

Ves recognized that he needed to find a way to solve this problem. Although he already told Calabast that he didn't want to appease the traditionalists, he still wanted to obtain their support, if only to drag them into the camp of the reformers!

Aside from the form of the mech, Ves wanted to do something special with its X-Factor as well.

Although his visit to the Grand Church of the Grey Martyr ended in tragedy, his brief exposure to the Grey Martyr's relics opened his eyes.

This was because Ves noted that some of the relics contained a touch of spirituality.

#### **Chapter 1188 Spiritual Accumulation**

Ves wasn't impressed by the relics that the Grand Church of the Grey Martyr put on display.

They mainly consisted of random articles of clothing, discarded data pads, empty nutrient packs and so on. It was as if the early Ylvainan worshippers dug into the Grey Martyr's recycling chute and rescued his trash before they underwent processing.

What would the Grey Martyr think if millions of devoted Ylvainans visited the grand church each year and worshipped his empty nutrient pack wrappers?

"It's rather absurd when you think about it! How can his trash be considered relics?"

The Grey Martyr probably left some more valuable relics behind, but a grand church on Kesseling VIII wasn't important enough to host such valuables.

Even so, Ves became pleasantly surprised that some of the more sentimental-looking knickknacks possessed a touch of spirituality. While he hadn't inspected their composition and flavor in detail, Ves believed those objects may have captured some of the spiritual energy of the Grey Martyr himself!

Still, during his brief tour at the museum wing, he also noticed another important detail. A lot of heterogeneous flavors had mixed into the faint spiritual presences.

While these additions amplified the miniscule amount of spiritual energy the Grey Martyr had left behind on some of the relics, they also decreased their purity.

It was like filling a nearly-empty cup of water with sewage water. While the cup held a lot more liquid, most of it consisted of filth, which didn't suit his purposes!

According to his understanding of spirituality, the relics gained all of this heterogeneous spiritual energy through the accumulation of worship of visiting Ylvainans.

The spiritual energy of an average baseline human was miniscule. Humans also couldn't control their own spiritual energy.

Therefore, even if the relics had been visited by billions of devout Ylvainans, the total accumulation of spiritual energy was really pathetic. Ves could pinch them flat with just a slight effort.

Nonetheless, learning about this interaction made Ves think of something else. If some random junk that used to belong to the Grey Martyr could accumulate a modest amount of spiritual energy, what about something more important?

There were other places which put much more significant relics on display. His characteristic grey robe that he wore for decades ever since the Ylvainan Faith rose up, for example.

How much spiritual energy had been bled off the visiting Ylvainans over the centuries?

Such an important relic which contained a strong imprint of the Grey Martyr must have accumulated a massive amount of heterogeneous spiritual energy!

A bold idea came to mind. Could he find a way to remove the chaotic imprints of this heterogeneous spiritual energy?

This process was akin to treating the raw sewage so that only pure water remained!

The second step was to blend all of this energy with the spiritual imprint of the Grey Martyr. As long as he succeeded in doing so, then what emerged at the end would be a relic that possessed a very powerful and coherent spiritual presence!

Ves knew that such a procedure was possible. Qilanxo's spiritual fragment already demonstrated the process.

However, he never attempted to replicate this process before. He simply didn't possess the raw strength and control to copy such an intricate procedure.

Yet ever since he advanced to Journeyman, Ves began to gain more confidence in his Spirituality. While he was nowhere equal to Qilanxo's vast spiritual might, he nonetheless managed to close the distance.

The question now was whether he was strong enough to manipulate the imprints of spiritual energy.

"It shouldn't be too hard."

He recognizes several points that worked in his favor. First, working with a relic that used to belong to an impressive figure like the Grey Martyr might possess a lot of spiritual energy, but the individual in question was long-dead.

Even if some powerful spiritual remnant of the Grey Martyr still existed somewhere in the imaginary realm, it had undergone centuries of erosion. Hardly any conscious thought remained.

Therefore, his spiritual imprint shouldn't put up much of a resistance if Ves decided to mess with it in some way.

The same applied to the spiritual imprints on the large accumulation of heterogeneous spiritual energy.

While the total amount of spiritual energy would definitely be large, it was not coherent. A single average human's spiritual imprint was so miniscule that Ves could probably wipe it out with a single thought as long as he figured out the right method.

Therein lay the crux. None of this would work if Ves failed to replicate the method shown by Qilanxo's spiritual fragment.

Ves came to a decision. "I need to test and practice these ideas. Preferably on something small and weak at first."

This would not be easy. The Ylvainans would never hand over their relics to Ves to experiment with. Perhaps he might have had a chance before, but now that he became a polarizing figure in Ylvainan society, he could forget about obtaining anything!

No one wanted to see him defile their holy relics with his demonic touch!

Nonetheless, Ves did not give up on this idea. The more he thought about it, the more it appealed to him. If this method proved viable, he could apply it in many other situations besides designing Ylvainan mechs!

One of the biggest problems that hampered his ambitions was that spiritual fragments were hard to come by!

The imaginary realm was largely empty and devoid of strong spiritual entities. The only surefire way for him to obtain a spiritual fragment with the attributes he desired was to track down the spiritual presences of notable high-ranking mech pilots and mech designers and steal some of their precious spiritual energy.

However, this was a really risky procedure! The few times he did so, he always felt as if he was at risk of being caught!

"I'm only a single mistake away from being exposed!"

Stealing someone else's spiritual energy was a last resort to Ves. Ever since he advanced to Journeyman, he already noted that much of his spiritual strength had been locked away in his design seed. The amount of loose spiritual energy he could wield was still strong, but not to the extent where he could overpower the force of will of every expert pilot.

If he had no other choice, then he would still employ this method, but only for the mech designs he strongly cared about. It wasn't worth it for him to risk exposure or incurring a backlash when he messed up one day.

That shouldn't be necessary if Ves could verify the latest method he came up with. Stealing spirituality from a lifeless object was a much safer and harmless alternative!

As for the damage the relics themselves incurred through messing with and stealing their accumulated spiritual energy, who cared? They were just lifeless objects to begin with! Whatever life they gained from their exposure to important figures and the worship of countless people would live on in his mech designs!

"I'm doing the Ylvainans a favor!"

Obviously, obtaining permission to mess with the relics remained his biggest problem. Ves obsessed over this problem for a while.

He first decided to put forward a request to Calabast. He took the enormous trouble of traveling to her headquarters and endured all the security checks before he met her again in her office.

"What is it, Ves? Did you change your mind?" She asked with a hopeful smile.

"No. I still want to try it my way. I've come here to put forward a difficult request. It will sound rather strange, but as long as you fulfill it, my chances of success can easily be tripled!"

This boast immediately caught her attention. "I hope you're not exaggerating. Let's hear it, then. What do you want?"

"I need.. I need to obtain a historical Ylvainan relic. It doesn't have to be anything too valuable or important. If you can obtain one of the relics that used to be housed in the Grand Church of the Grey Martyr, then that would be best!"



His request completely stunned Calabast, though she exerted as much control as possible to maintain an impassive facade. It spoke well to her ability as a spy that Ves hadn't been able to read anything from her expression.

"Please be frank. Are you serious?"

"I am."

This time, Calabast deliberately adopted a difficult expression. "Every relic that possesses a solid connection to Prophet Ylvaine and his Martyred Followers is a treasure to the Ylvainans. The Attendants of Ylvaine are responsible for tracking and guarding them, and they're extremely fanatical about keeping them under their administration! It's impossible for a Curin like me to borrow a relic from those fanatics!"

The Poxco Dynasty were strongly inclined towards the traditionalists. They were the most devout believers of the Ylvainan Faith, but that subsequently meant that they were also the most self-righteous and insular among the bunch.

If there was one leading dynasty they disliked the most, it was the Curin Dynasty for their forward-thinking ways! Both of them sat firmly on the opposite sides on how to prepare the Protectorate against the coming war against the Star Faith Collective!

"Isn't there any other way to convince the Attendants of Ylvaine to let go of one of their relics?" He asked. "I don't even need to possess it for long. A couple of hours will do."

"No. Absolutely not. You can forget about it. You're probably their least-favorite person in the Protectorate right now. What do you want to do with a relic, anyway? Isn't it enough to watch it from afar?"

Ves considered the option of visiting a museum or church that held a relic but shook his head.

While the distance didn't hinder him as much, the closer he got, the more fine control he was able to exert.

Another factor was that the strength of his spiritual exertions weakened over a distance.

He didn't know if he could manage to pull off his method from a distance. Even if he could, he would look awkward and suspicious as hell if he stood in front of a single display for ten minutes straight. It would be awful if the guards suspected that he was up to no good!

"Oh, by the way, I don't suggest you go out at this time." Calabast warned. "After the initial attack on the grand church, the Curins put a lot of effort into investigating whether there are other threats on Kesseling VIII. While they haven't found anything solid yet, they have reasons to suspect that you're still being targeted!"

Ves grimaced. "So it's not safe for me to travel anymore?"

"It's fine if you want to visit my headquarters or the mech workshop that I've put at your disposal. You can forget about going anywhere else, let alone an important cultural institution such as a church or a museum! The Curins have already issued orders to restrict your movements. The Protectors of the Faith that are assigned to guard you will make sure that you won't be able to deviate from your route!"

A short silence ensued as Ves digested this piece of news. He didn't feel angry about being restricted like this. In the interest of public safety, it made a lot of sense to keep Ves away from valuable sites where there were lots of people present.

He shook his head in resigned disappointment. "Okay. If you can't help me with this, I'll find something else."

The two didn't part on good terms. Ves recognized that Calabast was under a lot of pressure and was doing the best she could for the both of them. Asking her to allow him to borrow a relic was a long shot anyway.

As soon as he returned to the guest compound, he asked around and tracked down Lucky. His pet was comfortably snoozing on a windowsill while enjoying the rays of sunshine falling on his body.

"Lucky? Wake up. I have a job for you!"

### **Chapter 1189 High-Impact Mech**

The more the Ylvainans wanted to put him down, the more he wanted to defy their expectations.

Ves became driven to design a mech that proved everyone wrong. He wanted to reverse the setbacks he suffered and deal a painful blow to his enemies.

To that end, he decided to pull out all the stops. What did it matter if he acted a little bit unscrupulous? His finished product would put all of his sins to rest.

In order to see whether his latest idea worked, he foisted a dangerous task on Lucky.

After the terrorist attack on the Grand Church of the Grey Martyr, the place had been closed off to the public. A careful rescue and recovery process took place that recently finished.

All of the bodies, whether alive or dead, had been dug out of the ruined grand church.

Once the authorities dealt with this priority, they slowed down their excavation work and carefully removed all of the important relics and objects from the place.

The museum wing that Ves visited before also suffered a collapse. According to the news, the ceiling went down on at least half of the wing, burying many displays underneath an enormous amount of rubble.

Some of the displays even broke, exposing the relics within to an untold amount of damage!

Rescuing and salvaging these exposed relics became a very delicate operation. The Attendants of Ylvaine would not be able to bear it if they inadvertently damaged the relics connected to the Grey Martyr even further when they hastily dug them out of the rubble!

Therefore, the recovery process slowed down to a crawl. Many relics still remained buried underneath. The Attendants of Ylvaine employed the best experts to calculate the most optimal way to recover the historical objects.

This left Ves with a valuable window of opportunity! Stealing a relic buried underneath a lot of rubble was a lot easier than trying to steal them from a heavily-monitored museum or high-security vault!

If the Attendants of Ylvaine were known for one thing, it was that they treasured their relics as if they were personifications of the great figures themselves!

All of the caution they displayed at the moment exceeded the care and attention shown by the rescue services! The lives of average Ylvainans weren't as important as the integrity of the relics that the Grey Martyr had personally held all those centuries ago!

While those buried relics may be troublesome to recover to most people, that didn't apply to Lucky.

Convincing Lucky to raid the relics took quite a bit of effort, though.

"Come on, Lucky. You just have to go incorporeal and phase through the ground to get at the relics. With all of your ECM systems that you assimilated from my CFA gear, you should be able to do so without alarming the Attendants of Ylvaine!"

"Meow-Meow!"

"I don't believe you. There should be a way for you to not only phase your body, but also anything you hold. Don't forget that I once used this ability myself. I might not be able to replicate it anymore, but I'm pretty sure that I managed to phase all of my gear along with my body!"

"Meeeeeoow."

"So you are capable of phasing other stuff along with you. It just drains a lot of energy."

"Meow."

"It's just energy. I can make it up to you anytime! In fact, you still owe me a debt! Did you think I forgot that you ate my CFA shuttle, armor and comm without permission?"

"Meow!!!"

"What does my mom has to do with it? Just because she can steal stuff from me doesn't mean you should follow her example! No more whining, Lucky. Just do as I ask!"

After feeding Lucky the relevant information, the cat resentfully turned incorporeal and disappeared from view. With all the abilities at his disposal, Ves didn't worry too much about failure.

It would be a different story if Ves wanted to obtain a more important relic, but that was for later.

While Lucky went off on his mission, Ves sat down on a couch and began to consider the hero mech he wanted to design.

"I should form a basic mech concept and vision first."

What kind of mech appealed to the Ylvainans?

The Ylvainans didn't exhibit a strong preference towards specific mech configurations. They paid a lot more attention to how much a mech expressed their faith. Lengthy periods of peace interspersed with sporadic battles against pirates, criminals and extremists tended to bias them towards peak performance mechs with low endurance.

"This bias towards optimal performances in short skirmishes is one of the reasons why they haven't fared well against the Star Faith Collective." He recalled.

The Protectors of the Faith always fared well in battles against poorly-equipped pirates and other scum. However, against a large military mech force, the Ylvainan mechs entered the battle with the wrong configuration!

The Star Worshippers fielded tougher, more expensive mechs that wouldn't collapse from a couple of blows. They studied their opponents well and knew that they merely had to endure the initial offensive and wait for the Protectors of the Faith to run out of steam.

Once the Ylvainan mechs began to run low on energy, that was when the Star Worshippers initiated their counter-attack!

Not every battle proceeded in this fashion. The Protectors of the Faith had already begun to replace some of their mechs with ones that fared much better in longer battles. Yet this was just one of several weaknesses the Star Worshippers exploited.

"The difference in martial tradition is too huge. Many Ylvainan mech regiments have adopted mech doctrines that have never been tested in actual battle!"

The Ylvaine Protectorate never fought any battles against their neighbors before. This was both a blessing and a curse. The long period of peace allowed them to develop their planets and star systems without depending on foreign trade.

Nonetheless, just like the Reinaldians, the Ylvainans had become overly complacent. The Protectors of the Faith may look impressive, but their bark was stronger than their bite. Their actual combat strength was significantly less than their numbers suggested!

The forward-thinking reformers recognized this inadequacy. They realized that their domestic mech industry was not up to par with the regional standard anymore. They lost faith in their own mech designers.

Ves had been tasked with designing a ceremonial bodyguard mech. Different from a military mech, such machines needed to be able to respond quickly and fiercely to fend off surprise attacks.

"Bodyguard mechs don't require a lot of endurance. They only have to last long enough to escort their charges to safety or stall the attackers long enough for reinforcements to arrive."

A complicated feeling arose within his heart when he thought about his current client. Calabast trusted him to design a hero mech that protected her life.

For a moment, he was tempted to fudge his design and incorporate a hidden weak point, but he quickly stomped out this impulse.

His pride as a mech designer wouldn't allow him to violate his duty! Whatever he thought about Calabast, she was his client now, and as a mech designer it was his job to accommodate her demands to the best of his ability!

Ves had been rather lax with his responsibilities a few times, and he always paid a price for his transgressions. Now that he advanced to Journeyman, he suspected that it became more important than ever to stick to his principles!

He turned his attention back to his hero mech. Considering its mission profile, Ves determined that the mech needed to last a long time on standby but be able to deliver a lot of impact when needed.

After a bit of brainstorming, he narrowed down his mech concept.

First, it had to be a landbound mech. Ves already ruled out designing an aerial mech because a hero mech was already complicated enough. Adding flight capabilities to his design would only add more bloat while forcing him to compromise on many aspects.

The added mobility simply didn't make up for the sacrifices he needed to make in his design.

"Hero mechs normally don't place too much emphasis on mobility." Ves muttered.

In general, the mech industry classified a hero mech as an offensive mech design. Much of the focus on their design lay in their offensive capacity. They only came equipped with enough mobility and armor to strengthen their versatile offensive power.

Therefore, settling for a landbound mech was sufficient because the mech would be able to employ its rifle to any threats that remained out of reach.

As for the weapon loadout of the mech, Ves opted to go for a sword and ballistic rifle.

A sword was the standard one-handed weapon of a hero mech. The elite mech pilots that Calabast had acquired all piloted hero mechs armed with



swords during their simulation battles, so he didn't intend to mess them up by foisting them with a weapon they hadn't practiced before.

He intended to solicit some feedback from Ketis regarding his hero mech's sword. Even though she was far behind him in many aspects, her specialty centered around swords and sharpness.

For the ranged option of his hero mech, Ves settled on a ballistic rifle instead of a laser rifle. While he possessed a lot of expertise in designing mechs armed with laser weapons, a bodyguard mech required more immediate firepower.

"Laser weapons can deal a lot more damage in long, drawn-out battles. The only problem is that bodyguard mechs don't have the time to wear down their enemies at their own pace."

Ballistic rifles may not be as sophisticated as laser weapons, but their firepower and dependability was undeniable. The rounds they fired could pack a variety of explosive or penetrating effects.

Most mechs armed with ballistic rifles merely fired standard explosive shells that packed a decent explosive and kinetic punch for their cost.

However, as long as Calabast invested more money on ammunition, she could easily supply her bodyguard mechs with more premium exotic-enriched rounds.

This allowed his hero mech to possess enough firepower to take out their opponents faster!

The major downside to ballistic rifles was that a mech could only carry so much ammunition. Once the hero mech ran out of magazines, its ballistic rifle was as useful as a fragile club.

Still, it wasn't as if his hero mech would fight an intensive battle for several hours straight. If Calabast had any sense, then she would stick to areas that were close to friendly reinforcements.

It only took around fifteen minutes for the Protectors of the Faith stationed elsewhere to respond to the recent terrorist attack. Providing his hero mechs with enough ammunition to last half an hour should be sufficient for their purpose.

"If a battle is being drawn out for whatever reason, the mech pilots can just fire less in order to conserve their ammunition."

A basic picture of his hero mech emerged. While he hadn't defined its appearance as of yet, its vague shape suggested a high-impact mech that defended its charge by overwhelming its opponents with a ferocious offensive!

Combining powerful shells with a strong sword arm, his hero mech was squarely designed to fight fire with fire!

While his hero mech design excelled in offensive power, their ability to defend was a lot more modest. Aside from their armor, they didn't possess any other defensive solutions.

"Other bodyguard mechs can take over this duty."

Rather than attempting to make his hero mech fulfill both an offensive and defensive role, Ves decided to focus entirely on the former while leaving the latter to other mechs. He already knew that Calabast's bodyguard detail consisted of many defensive knight mechs.

After determining this basic configuration, Ves wondered whether he should add something extra to his mech concept.

He shook his head. "I shouldn't. For a hero mech, two weapon systems is enough. Adding anything else will only weaken the core performance metrics of my design."

He wasn't working with Terran high technology this time where every component came in very compact shapes. He needed to ration the internal volume of his mech design carefully. Employing two weapon systems on a single design took up so much space that Ves didn't expect any room for other gimmicks.

#### **Chapter 1190 Narrow Target Audience**

Ves settled on designing a high-impact mech without too many frills. Aside from its dual weapon systems, he didn't think it was wise to overcomplicate his design any further.

"Hero mechs are already gimmicks by themselves." He snorted. "Adding a gimmick to a hero mech is like putting lipstick on a pig."

After determining the mech concept for his design, he moved on to fleshing out his vision for his mech.

A mech was more than just a collection of parts that fit with its mech concept. A good design attempted to tie them all together in a holistic manner. Synergy, fit, ease of use and more all depended on how a mech designer fashioned their designs.

When it came to his own design style, Ves exhibited a strong preference towards ease of use.

Influenced by his Mastery experiences, he designed his mechs around their pilots.

He developed a strong focus towards enabling the mech pilots of his products to showcase their maximum potential when paired together.

This inevitably meant that he sacrificed some optimization geared towards pulling more synergy and performance out of his mechs.

The question Ves faced right now was whether he should adopt the same approach to his current design project.

"Previously, I designed my mechs with moderately-skilled mech pilots in mind." He recalled.

The Blackbeak and Crystal Lord were both premium products, so Ves designed them with advanced pilots in mind.

However, the range of skill between an average advanced pilot and one who trained to the level of elites was quite substantial.

The latter displayed much greater skill and pulled out a lot more potential out of their mechs. This difference sometimes grew so large that their mechs couldn't keep up with their skill level!

"I'm not designing a mass market product this time. The only mech pilots that I need to take into account are the six elites I met before!"

The six members of the Kronon Dynasty graduated from the best Ylvainan mech academies with honors. They possessed a strong mastery in both swordsmanship and marksmanship despite their young ages.

All in all, Ves could expect so much more from their performance. Due to the narrow scope of his commission, he didn't need to take any other mech pilots into account.

If one of the six Kronons retired or transferred away for any reason, then Calabast could easily obtain another elite mech pilot from the Kronon Dynasty to occupy the freed-up machine.

"There's really no chance that a lesser-skilled mech pilot will pilot my hero mech."

This was an important realization. It liberated him from the invisible shackles that long constrained his mech designs.

Another way to describe his situation was that he didn't have to adhere to market demand. Unlike his commercial mech designs, this time he didn't have to place too much emphasis on the competition.

"I don't have to make design choices that increases the appeal of my mechs at the cost of practicality or performance."

That didn't mean that Ves had a license to design an uncompetitive mech that performed awfully compared to similar mech models on the market. He would be tarnishing his reputation instead of redeeming it if he exploited the commission in this fashion.

What actually mattered was that Ves only needed to design a mech for a very miniscule target audience.

However, a big complication arose when Ves thought about the complexity of hero mechs. This mech type was already very difficult to pilot.

A Terran mech pilot like Axelar Streon didn't exhibit much strain when piloting the Ouroboros. Ves could not expect a third-class mech pilot from the galactic rim to exhibit the same ease when piloting a 'simple' hero mech.

"I need more data." He concluded.

To that end, he made a brief comm call to Calabast. He requested a copy of the telemetry and combat footage of the recent simulation battles.

"No problem, Ves. The data is too sensitive to be transmitted over the galactic net, so I'll dispatch a courier. Be sure to treat the data carefully. You'll only be able to read the secure data chip from a restricted terminal at the mech workshop I've set aside for you. Don't lose it and don't let anyone else take it away. Destroy it once you're done."

Calabast treated the data very seriously because it could be disastrous for her if they fell in the wrong hands.

Ves hadn't visited the mech workshop yet, but he looked forward to working there. From what he heard, the site used to belong to another mech company that became defunct. Calabast took it over and transferred it to their new joint venture.

The idea was that the local mech designer they partnered up with would reside in the mech workshop most of the time. Such a well-equipped workplace enabled them to adapt the LMC's designs for the local market.

Unfortunately, they couldn't proceed with this part of the plan. Even the mech technicians that Calabast inherited from the defunct mech company all resigned from their jobs once they heard they worked for Ves now!

"I don't need them anyway." He sneered.

Ves accepted the fact that he was a pariah in Protectorate space. The only reason why he didn't make a big deal out of it was because he possessed the confidence to redeem his reputation.

Everything hinged on his results! As long as he dazzled the Ylvainans with a fantastic mech design, he could make them forget about all the accusations that had been thrown in his way!

Afterwards, he expected no further trouble in recruiting local mech designers and mech technicians.

"They shouldn't expect to receive generous conditions when that happens."

Ves prized loyalty. He hoped he could find someone motivated and dedicated enough to work with him to expand the LMC's reach.

Sadly, no one wanted to take the risk. With so many mech designers reluctant to associate with him, he no longer placed high expectations on the local mech designers.

"They can be cowards all they want, but they shouldn't expect many rewards if they aren't willing to take some risks."

He knew he was being a bit unfair to the Ylvainan mech designers. Brighter mech designers could be just as cowardly and risk-averse.

He shook his head. "There's no point thinking any further about the locals."

Ves began to envision a high-impact mech that emphasized raw power in exchange for control. Even if this design direction meant that his hero mech would be slightly more difficult to pilot, he was confident that the elite Kronon mech pilots could keep up with the sheer might at their disposal.

"The mech has to be mechanically strong."

More mechanical power meant faster movements and better acrobatics. A skilled mech pilot would be able to use the additional power to perform all kinds of unorthodox moves that confounded normal mech pilots.

In fact, mech designers adopted a similar approach to professional dueling mechs.

While Ves didn't intend to design a dueling mech, some of its principles still applied to his project. Most dueling mechs consisted of high-impact, peak performance mechs because they maximized the skill of their mech pilots.

"If you have good mech pilots, then it's best to design a mech that is strongly affected by their skills."

The reverse also applied. If Ves had to design a mech for awful mech pilots, then it was best to dumb down his design and automate as many aspects as

possible. This was the whole reason why frontline mechs existed in the first place.

Overall, Ves concluded that in this particular situation, it was best if he let go of some of his older priorities and focus on maximizing performance at the cost of ease of use.

It was a very incongruent mindset to adopt at first. Yet once he convinced himself that he was designing a custom mech, he was able to live with the changes.

Ves walked up to a terminal and activated a design program. He drafted up the basic shape of his hero mech design.

He unconsciously incorporated some of the elements of the Ouroboros into his design. Just like his first hero mech design, he split his current mech design in two. One side excelled in exerting a lot of mechanical strength while the other side offered much greater precision.

Just like with the Ouroboros, the asymmetry introduced a lot of imbalances in his design. Back then, the auto designer took care of all of the underlying technical problems that he introduced by designing such an uneven mech.

This time, he didn't have any access to sophisticated AIs that had been programmed with robust problem-solving capabilities.

Even if he somehow obtained a copy of the software of the auto designer, hardly any processor bank in the Protectorate could keep up with the sheer amount of calculations the AIs performed!

"It will take a lot of time for me to manually balance the design." He muttered.

This was a very pertinent problem because he was working on a time limit. If he took too much time on designing this mech, then he might miss his self-imposed deadline of earning the MTA's recognition!



While Ves really wanted to do his utmost to design his hero mech, the short amount of time he reserved on this project seriously hampered his ability to achieve all of his goals.

"I will just have to do the best I can and hope my increased ability can keep up with my pace."

He hadn't forgotten about the System either. If he found himself lacking in some aspect, he could always materialize his System comm from his Inventory and upgrade some of his Skills and Sub-Skills.

At this time, someone rang at his door, pulling him away from his contemplation on which Skill he should upgrade next.

"Come in."

Leland entered with a troubled expression. "There's a problem, Ves."

"What's the matter?" He asked while closing his design software. He could get back at his project at any time. "You seem quite concerned."

"Due to the recent terrorist attack, the Ylvaine Protectorate dispatched a lot of investigators to find out the truth and track down those responsible for the attack. One of them has arrived at our compound without warning."

Ves had already faced some questioning before immediately after the attack. "I've already answered plenty of questions. What more do they want to ask?"

"The investigators who questioned us before worked for the local police forces. They're aligned with the Curin Dynasty so they didn't press us very hard. This time is different. The Attendants of Ylvaine sent one of their high inquisitors to interrogate you in person!"

Ves widened his eyes. Even though he didn't know how much power they wielded, just this title alone implied many awful possibilities!

"What did the Curins say about this unannounced visit?"

"It's unwise to hinder a high inquisitor on duty." Leland ruefully smiled. "The Curins may be able to stop inquisitors from snooping on their core family members, but they aren't willing to pay the price when it comes to us. Regardless, we aren't guilty anyway, so they don't think we'll face too many risks."

This wasn't something that Miss Cecily could stop. The Attendants of Ylvaine may be largely concerned with administering the faith, but their importance in Ylvainan society was just as great as the Protectors of the Faith and the Shepherds of the Flock!

Ves exited his room with a resigned expression and went down to the foyer of the compound. There, he encountered a richly-dressed old man surrounded by more modest-looking lackeys.

An ugly expression came over the old man's face. "I am High Inquisitor Xefin Lin Poxco. You must be Mr. Larkinson."

Ves tried to maintain his composure. "Please to meet you, high inquisitor."

"I have come to inquire on some matters concerning the recent attack on the grand church. Are you willing to sit down with me and answer my questions?"

"I'd be glad to, sir."

It wasn't as if Ves could refuse. The piercing glance sent by the high inquisitor told him that he wouldn't like it if he said no!