

Chapter 1191 Xefin Lin Poxco

Upon his acceptance, the high inquisitor led Ves to a small office room in the compound. The assistants that accompanied the old man swept the office up for bugs and set up small devices that Ves recognized as body scanners and lie detectors.

That meant trouble!

Ves instantly knew that he needed to watch his words. He couldn't employ his usual bold lies to get away from a tough situation. Someone who made his living by interrogating all sorts of characters wouldn't be fooled by his usual word plays either.

He nonetheless grew nervous despite his assurances of innocence. He was more than aware that out of all the major factions in the Protectorate, the Attendants of Ylvaine opposed his presence the most!

Their devoutness was just as great as their narrow-mindedness!

Once his assistants finished setting up their devices, they left the office, leaving Ves and the high inquisitor alone.

Ves awkwardly stared at the old man sitting on the opposite side of the desk.

"Mr. Larkinson." He began with a firm voice that belied his skinny, senile form.

"In the name of the prophet, I hope we can uncover the truth. Let us begin with some basic questions. First, are you a citizen of the Bright Republic?"

"I am. Born and raised."

"You come from a prominent military family that is known for its mech pilots and expert pilots, is that correct?"

"Yes. The Larkinsons are very well-known in the Bright Republic for those reasons."

"You are different, however." The high inquisitor noted. "You are the first and only Larkinson to study mech design and achieve success in your career."

"That's correct."

"Are you truly a Larkinson?"

Ves frowned at that question. "I fail to see how this question is relevant to the investigation of the terrorist attack."

The high inquisitor became more intense. His eyes burned at Ves with increasing fervor. "Answer. The. Question."

Somehow, the man was able to apply a lot of pressure to Ves without resorting to any fancy spiritual strength!

He decided to answer the question despite his own misgivings. "I consider myself a Larkinson, yes."

"Ah, but do you, really?" High Inquisitor Poxco smiled. "Why the reluctance, then?"

"Because it's personal. Whatever I might think about my last name, I will always stick up for my family."

Ves was being a bit disingenuous here. The family he valued only consisted of a dozen Larkinsons or so. As for his more distant relatives, they could fend for themselves!

He faintly suspected that the high inquisitor managed to capture this detail. That put him even further on guard. They hadn't even talked about anything important yet but the old man was already reading him like a book!

"Let us move on to your work. You are a mech designer, right? Please succinctly describe your job."

This was a very open-ended question. Ves wasn't sure why the high inquisitor asked something as basic as his job description.

"Mech designers are a highly-educated individuals who make their living by designing large war machines commonly classified as mechs."

"Is that all to your profession?"

Ves shrugged. "Mech designers combine both art and science to design their mechs. We possess a strong grasp in many different fields of science and engineering. Different from academics, we apply our knowledge in creative ways that make up our own distinct design styles."

"What is your design style?"

"It's difficult to describe to laymen."

"Try it anyway." The high inquisitor gestured with his hand.

"The most simple explanation that I can offer is that I design my mechs with an eye towards how they affect people. My foremost priority is to design a mech that meshes well with their mech pilots. I've become quite good at this if I say so myself. My second priority is to make the appearances of my mechs stand out. While not every customer appreciates the latter aspect, I think I have enough customers who appreciates my mechs."

The high inquisitor leaned forward. "Interesting. I have read some publications concerning your mech designs. Many of them describe that your mechs exhibit a most unusual quality. According to the descriptions, anyone observing your mechs will feel very odd about them. Your mechs are known to possess a very compelling quality that never fails to attract attention. Can you explain the reason why your mechs are able to induce such reactions?"

This question came very close to one of his secrets!

"High inquisitor, the answer to this question is very delicate."

"Please address me as 'Your Excellency'."

"Ahem." Ves awkwardly coughed. "Your Excellency, as I was saying, the matter that you've described is tied to my mech designer specialization. Every aspect that is related to our specialty is classified as valuable trade secrets by the MTA. According to their regulations, a mech designer is not obliged to answer any questions concerning their specialty and other trade secrets. Only MTA itself reserves that right."

"Ah." The high inquisitor smiled. "You are correct, Mr. Larkinson. Thank you for reminding me of my oversight. As a lawful servant of the Ylvainan state, it is not my intention to encroach upon the strictures set by the MTA."

The Mech Trade Association both restricted and protected the rights of mech designers. While Ves frequently ran afoul of their rules and regulations, he knew he wouldn't have it nearly as easy if the powerful organization didn't exist.

The MTA explicitly protect a mech designer's right to protect their trade secrets for some very good reasons.

If they allowed agents of the state to coerce mech designers into giving up their trade secrets, then a lot of abuse would ensue.

Politically-connected mech designers could encourage corrupt authorities to drum up false charges to arrest a promising mech designer.

Once placed in their custody, the interrogators could do anything they wanted to get a mech designer to spill all of their trade secrets and feed them back to the mastermind!

Such developments went against the spirit of fair competition that the MTA prized. Therefore, the organization found it necessary to reserve the right to interrogate mech designers on matters concerning their specialty and other trade secrets.

This was how it was supposed to work. In practice, Ves heard stories where not all states abided by this regulation. The MTA wasn't omnipotent and plenty of abuses happened behind closed doors.

Ves didn't rule out the possibility that the Attendants of Ylvaine might be tempted to play dirty.

Only two factors reassured him a bit.

First, he possessed the backing of the Curin Dynasty and Calabast specifically. Considering her personal interest in his well-being, she should do everything possible to restrain the Poxco Dynasty from doing anything too egregious.

Second, he was way too high profile. Even if the MTA still registered him as an Apprentice Mech Designer in their files, there was no way they closed all of their eyes towards a de facto Journeyman.

In truth, any mech designer who managed to become a de facto Journeyman possessed a lot of potential! They were able to take an enormous leap forward in their careers despite having designed a lot less mechs than other Journeymen! This meant they held much more promise in their future advancement than anyone else!

The higher the rank, the more protection they received from the MTA. While a Journeyman didn't receive the amount of coddling they bestowed on expert pilots, they still played a role in restraining the excesses of state authorities.

Both Ves and Xefin Lin Poxco were aware of these conditions.

Perhaps the high inquisitor had more leeway with Novices and Apprentices. There were so many of them that the MTA hardly cared if the inquisitors roughed them up.

Ves was glad he successfully advanced prior to his trip to the Ylvaine Protectorate.

It was after contemplating all of this that Ves had an inkling of what was happening here. He hadn't done anything in the Ylvaine Protectorate.

Well, to be fair, he did order his pet to steal some priceless historical relics, but that didn't count!

The main point was that the high inquisitor shouldn't have the legal basis to accuse him of any crimes.

While he and his Avatars of Myth did kill a bunch of people, they acted reasonably in self-defense. As far as he knew, they hadn't killed any innocent bystanders that the high inquisitor could use as an excuse.

This led Ves to believe that Xefin Lin Poxco was trying to fish for information.

Once he realized this, Ves relaxed a bit as the high inquisitor was ready to move on to another line of questioning.

"You have initially come to the Ylvaine Protectorate in order to fulfill a commission to design a special mech for Director Cecily Curin." The inquisitor said. "Please describe the mech she commissioned from you."

Ves coughed again. "Your Excellency, the contracts that I've signed with the director prevents me from divulging the contents of our agreements. It is highly inappropriate for me to reveal this information without her permission. You will have to approach the client and gain her approval if you wish you hear the answer to this question."

"She requested you to design a ceremonial bodyguard mech, is that correct?"

"I am not at liberty to say so."

"It is not difficult to find out that the commission calls for you to design a so-called hero mech. The six wayward mech pilots she bought from the Kronon

Dynasty all have one strength in common. They are proficient in both melee and ranged mech combat."

Ves tried to smile back. "Please understand. I cannot speak on behalf of Director Cecily."

The high inquisitor frowned for a bit. "I see. I will be sure to do so. She's a fascinating woman, don't you think?"

"As far as I'm concerned, she's just a client."

"From what I've gathered, the relationship between the two of you is far from superficial. The two of you are quite friendly with each other. How long have you known her? A couple of weeks?"

Ves tentatively nodded.

"And you have never known her before she presented her commission to your company?" The inquisitor asked with raised attention.

"I am not familiar with Director Cecily Curin prior to the commission. Only when I arrived on this planet did I meet with the director in person for the very first time."

"Interesting. Then why did you not only accept the commission, but also made plans to setup a joint venture between your mech company and a holding company under the name?" The high inquisitor pressed. "The speed of this agreement astounds me. You barely know each other and you've already decided to become business partners!"

"We, I saw an opportunity to gain a privileged position in the Protectorate's mech market. As a business owner, I am always keen to jump on opportunities to make a profit. Director Curin made a very attractive offer to me, one that isn't open for long. I decided to jump on it fast before she takes her offer elsewhere!"

The high inquisitor raised a skeptical eyebrow at Ves. "Even if your interests aligned, I would expect that both of you would exhibit a bit more caution to each other. Instead, both of you acted inordinately quickly. What is it about Director Curin that makes you trust her so much?"

"I don't necessarily trust her, Your Excellency." Ves honestly admitted. "I put my faith in our mutual interests."

"Faith." The high inquisitor sneered. "Typical of you secular foreigners. While we put our faith in Prophet Ylvaine, you secularists would rather put your faith in money and contracts. What if I say your faith is misplaced in this case?"

"Pardon?"

"What if Director Curin is not who she claims to be?"

Uh oh. Ves began to get an inkling of the true reason for this questioning session.

High inquisitor Poxco hadn't come here to dig out his secrets. He was here to probe about Calabast!

Had she blown her cover somehow?

#### Chapter 1192 Original Sentimen

"I'm aware of what has transpired." Calabast said over the comm.

As soon as the friendly high inquisitor finished his inquiry, Ves immediately called his partner over his comm.

Both of them knew that their conversation wasn't secure, so they restrained themselves from discussing any sensitive matters. The high inquisitor might in fact be listening in right now!

"Who is he, exactly?" Ves asked.

"High Inquisitor Xefin Lin Poxco is a renowned figure in the Poxco Dynasty." Calabast calmly answered. "Born as a commoner, he joined the Attendants of

Ylvaine and became an adopted member of the dynasty. He worked as a priest for some time before finding his true calling as an inquisitor."

"So he enjoys hunting heretics for a living?"

"I know that secularists like you think of all kinds of horror stories as soon as you hear about an inquisition. The Ylvainan Inquisition is preoccupied with more than hunting heretics and blasphemers. They act as the investigative arm of the Ylvainan Faith. Their mandate extends to everything related to the faith. They particularly pay a lot of attention to anything that can threaten the supremacy of the Ylvainan Faith in the Protectorate."

This explanation sounded very vague to Ves. If the inquisitors twisted their interpretation to a certain extent, then anything that transpired in the Protectorate fell within their mandate!

"Is our business partnership under threat?" He asked.

She shook her head. "This is my problem, not yours. Our business relationship is still solid. The high inquisitor may have a lot of power, but the only reason he can be involved is due to the recent terrorist attack. Regardless of what the media says, it is a stretch to lay the blame on our feet."

"What about.. your position? Is it secure?"

"My directorship is secure." Calabast firmly stated over the comm. "I enjoy the support of the highest elders in the Curin Dynasty. They know what is at stake and they will not let the Ylvainan Inquisition run roughshod over us. If my guess is correct, then the inquisition is actually trying to dig into something else. For now, these waters are too deep for you to wade into. Don't inquire any further about this topic."

Calabast revealed a lot of information to Ves with her reply. He didn't believe she was a native Ylvainan at all. He always wondered how she smoothly managed to gain an identity in the Curin Dynasty.

It made sense that she enjoyed insider support. Otherwise, it would have been too outlandish for her to adopt the identity of a notable Curin.

What Ves didn't know until now was that the leaders of the Curin Dynasty was aware of her true origin!

This possible conclusion implied that Calabast's true background was a lot stronger than he imagined! If her true origin warranted the personal attention of the highest elders of the Curin Dynasty, then her former employers must be a force to be reckoned with in the region!

At the very least, Ves suspected that she may have struck a deal with them in order to acquire her current identity.

It concerned him a bit that Calabast's shady associations might spill over to Ves. He still didn't feel comfortable about their partnership yet. The information disparity between the two always put him on the defense.

While Calabast investigated his record and knew one of his greatest secrets, he knew almost nothing about her! Aside from the fact that she was a spy and she worked for a powerful organization, Ves didn't even know her real name!

"It has dawned upon me that I know very little about you." He pointed out. "For a supposed business partner, it is really disconcerting that you're not willing to share anything about yourself to me. A good business relationship is based on trust, you know."

"I know, but now is not the time, Mr. Larkinson." Calabast smiled at Ves. "As I've said before, it's sufficient for us to rely on mutual interest. Don't concern yourself about my matters and instead focus upon your own. The commission won't complete by itself and you have a lot of expectations riding on your

shoulders. The success of our subsequent ventures rely on how well you design your next mech. How much progress have you made up until now?"

"Not much. I'm still working on developing my vision for my upcoming mech. It's important for me to gain a good understanding of Ylvainan culture. If I get it wrong from the start, I won't be able to design anything significant no matter how much time and effort I put into this project."

"You're the mech designer. I trust in your abilities." She confidently said. As the holder of the Metal Scroll, any mech he designed was remarkable! "This is a delicate time. Keep your head down for now and don't get involved in anything that riles up the Ylvainan Inquisition."

Ves held up his hand in innocence. "Hey, who do you think I am? I'm just a mech designer. I don't have any other stake in the Ylvaine Protectorate besides designing and selling mechs."

"I'm just reminding you that you can't act with impunity here. High Inquisitor Xefin Lin Poxco may have paid a casual visit to you this time, but he won't hesitate to come at you hard as soon as you make a single misstep, especially if you profane the Ylvainan Faith. This is not the Bright Republic."

"I know. Don't worry. Since my movements are restricted, there's nothing I can do besides designing mechs."

They ended the call shortly after. He found it rather insulting that Calabast kept looking at him with a shifty expression, as if he was a naughty kid who couldn't help but pull off a stunt that would land them both in trouble.

Who did she think she was? She should look after her own conduct before accusing him of anything shady!

"I'm completely innocent!"

Just then, a slim metallic form phased through the wall.

"Meow!"

"Ah, Lucky, you're back!"

A small ECM field surrounded his incorporeal cat. This enabled him to move in and out of the tightly-guarded guest compound without arousing the attention of the Protectors of the Faith.

"Come closer. What did you manage to retrieve?"

Lucky clutched a small bag of assorted junk. As Ves took the bag and looked inside, he dug up several small objects.

He first lifted up a small suit button that purportedly came from one of the Grey Martyr's formal suits.

"Fake." Ves declared.

He didn't sense any significant spiritual accumulation in the object. It seemed that even if the grand church claimed that it belonged to the Grey Martyr, accumulation wouldn't take place if it was based upon lies.

This was an important observation to Ves.

He next picked up a preserved seed that purportedly came from a plant in the backyard of the Grey Martyr's old home.

"This is a bit more special."

The seed was so small and insignificant that it must not have impressed a lot of Ylvainans. Even so, its connection to the Grey Martyr must be true because Ves could sense a tiny concentration of spiritual energy that bore a distinct imprint.

"This bears further study."

The most important relic that Lucky retrieved was a decorative medallion made out of mundane alloys. It was a cheap commemorative item handed out

to all the worshippers of the Ylvainan Faith at its tenth anniversary since its founding.

Although Ylvaine already attracted a sizable following, not a lot of these medallions survived up to this day. Every medallion celebrating the tenth anniversary was a prized heirloom to any family that could trace their lineage back to the earliest followers of Ylvaine.

The one he held right now was special because of its association to the Grey Martyr! Ves specifically ordered Lucky to see if he could retrieve it because it was one of the most valuable relics of the grand church!

"Good boy! I'll be sure to add some extra exotics to your next meal?"

"Meow!" Lucky replied with disdain.

Holding the medallion in his hands allowed him to feel the rich but turbulent spiritual accumulation hidden within. Even those who didn't possess any remarkable spiritual strength would feel something unusual about this object. It projected a faint aura akin to those of his own mechs.

"It's too bad it's too heterogeneous."

The medallion received the worship of many billions of faithful Ylvainans over the years. He confirmed his previous speculation that many Ylvainans imparted a tiny bit of their spiritual energy to the medallion. It started off small, but over a long period of time the accumulation became increasingly more significant.

Ves even suspected that a positive feedback cycle was at work!

Perhaps at the start, the commemorative medallion didn't attract much attention. Even though it was a significant object that used to belong to the Grey Martyr himself, it was just a piece of cheap metal.

Yet as more and more worshippers imparted their spiritual energy into the object, it took on an increasingly more compelling quality. While its spiritual accumulation was filled with the pollution of random and incongruent thoughts, not everything was useless.

"All those believers have one thing in common: their faith."

Their devotion to the Ylvainan Faith meant that much of the spiritual accumulation locked within the medallion shared a common attribute to the original sentiment that the Grey Martyr originally left behind!

Ves knew that the Grey Martyr was born as a simple man who grew old before he first met the Prophet. He was an average commoner from the galactic heartland and did not possess any remarkable spiritual strength.

Even as he became one of the most important followers of Prophet Ylvaine, his spirituality never grew to a significant degree.

The galaxy didn't revolve around spirituality.

Ves deduced all of this from the trace of sentiment that the Grey Martyr left behind in the medallion. It was so miniscule that even a slight sneeze from Ves could extinguish it from existence!

Yet the strange part was that this original sentiment was surrounded and protected by the much larger mass of heterogeneous spiritual energy donated by other Ylvainans. It was as if this collective gathering of energy possessed just enough life to recognize that it needed to protect the Grey Martyr's original sentiment!

"Interesting. Very interesting." Ves nodded as he delved into the interaction between these two spiritual energies.

He faintly suspected that the larger grouping wanted to merge and empower the Grey Martyr's sentiment.

However, if a drop of pure, clean water fell into a glass of sewage, then only filth remained. Merging the two together would only lead to a net loss because the Grey Martyr's sentiment was simply too small and weak.

After determining all of this through his focused inspection, he developed two possible ways to obtain what he wanted out of the relic.

First, he could change both the spiritual imprint and the spiritual attribute of the heterogenous spiritual accumulation.

This required him to perform two very intricate procedures. While he had a good idea on how to replace one spiritual imprint with another, he felt much less confident about changing the attribute of spiritual energy.

"Is it even possible to do so?"

Ves believed that this wasn't as simple as he suspected.

Therefore, he decided to take a step back and employ a more modest solution. "The most workable approach is to filter out the sewage so that I'm only left with clean water that is as pure as the original drop of water."

This was a process of salvaging the spiritual attribute that conformed to the Grey Martyr's original sentiment. Ves might have to discard fifty, seventy or even ninety percent of the spiritual accumulation the medallion collected over the years!

He had no use for spiritual energy with incompatible attributes. Since he didn't possess the confidence that he convert them to another attribute, their presence served no use to him. He was better off throwing it away than allow it to continue to pollute the medallion!

"Even though I'll be left with a fraction of accumulation, all that is left is pure and homogenous."

Would he be able to merge this end product with the Grey Martyr's original sentiment? All of his plans concerning the X-Factor of his upcoming design hinged on whether he could pull off this stunt!

### Chapter 1193 Scent and Flavor

Ves threw the worthless suit button to Lucky.

"Meow?"

"Eat it."

"Meow!"

"What do you mean it tastes awful? You're able to digest the most unusual exotics! It shouldn't be any problem for you to eat a simple suit button!"

"Meow meow meow!"

"Yes, I know it's made out of composites. I don't care if it tastes awful to you. I need to get rid of this button without leaving any evidence behind."

After a bit more arguing, Ves eventually forced Lucky to eat the suit button. His cat mournfully hissed at him immediately afterwards.

The suit button tasted awful to Lucky! There was hardly anything of value to his remarkable digestion system!

Ves shook his head at the sight of his grumpy pet. He really didn't have a lot of choice to dispose of the evidence. He didn't trust the trash chutes of the guest compound because who knew how many sensors recorded the stuff he threw away.

If the Ylvainans tapped the records of the trash chutes and found out that one of the objects that Ves threw away happened to be one of their relics, there was no way he could offer a satisfactory explanation!

Fortunately, Lucky continued to stay by his side and cover the entire room with his ECM field. Under the cover of this protection, Ves wanted to process the other relics as fast as possible so he could dispose of them quickly.

The longer he possessed the seed and the medallion, the greater the chance of getting caught red-handed!

"The best way for me to avoid getting caught red-handed is if I've washed off the stain when the authorities come back."

Against someone as sharp and observant as High Inquisitor Xefin Lin Poxco, Ves would never dare to keep the two genuine relics of the Grey Martyr in his possession. He would stuff them both into Lucky's mouth this instant if the high inquisitor was right outside the door!

"Only two samples, huh? This is going to be difficult."

Each of these relics presented him with a valuable opportunity to verify his latest theories. The more experiments he conducted, the more certainty he gained. Having only two practice runs meant that Ves needed to get it right the first time!

"I won't have the opportunity to obtain much more relics. As soon as the Attendants of Ylvaine notice that some of them are missing, they'll surely tighten the security around their other relics!"

Lucky often raided the Mech Nursery's material stockpiles whenever he wanted a snack, so he was quite a proficient little thief. Yet that didn't mean he could sneak into everything and steal something valuable with impunity!

At the very least, Lucky didn't possess the ability to enter into total stealth. Anything guarded by humans or organic entities was very risky.

"I'll have to save my next chance for something that actually matters."

Ves looked down and beheld the two small objects in his hands. The seed didn't contain much spiritual accumulation so he didn't feel bad if he ruined its spiritual quality.

The medallion was a lot more valuable and possessed a much greater accumulation. It would be a lot more difficult for him to manipulate something stronger.

"It's too bad they can't stay intact once I'm done with them. They're too hot for me to retain."

Even if he succeeded in his experiments, he didn't want to incorporate anything related to the Grey Martyr to his upcoming mech design.

"My hero mech is based around the concept of a high-impact mech. Why would I want to pair it with a placid, old teacher?"

The X-Factor of his mech needed to match with its vision. To pair an aggressive mech with a peaceful design spirit would only diminish both of their qualities. The opposite of synergy would occur where the combining the two resulted in less than sum of two parts!

"It will be extremely detrimental if different aspects of my design are constantly fighting against each other!"

Ves already had another source in mind to prop up the X-Factor of his mech. However, he could forget about enacting his plan if his experiments right now didn't pan out. There was no point in thinking any further if his capabilities couldn't keep up with his ambitions!

He put down the valuable medallion and started with the seed. If he blocked all of his spiritual senses, then it appeared as a plain little seed covered in some preservative substance that protected it against the outside elements.

There was nothing immediately remarkable about the little seed. The Grey Martyr only imparted the lightest touch on it, which didn't help in building up a lot of spiritual accumulation.

Ves observed a correlation between the strength of the original sentiment and the spiritual accumulation that had developed around it. If the former was weak, the latter didn't have much grounds to grow.

"It doesn't help that it's an insignificant seed. If it wasn't connected to the Grey Martyr, it's completely worthless!"

How could the Ylvainan followers feel any awe when confronted by this little seed? Even if they were hardcore fans of the Grey Martyr, a seed still didn't inspire much devotion.

This happened to serve his purposes. The experiment he had in mind mainly depended on finesse. With a weaker spiritual accumulation, Ves didn't have to exert too much to enact his changes.

It would be different if he started with the medallion. Its stronger spiritual accumulation meant that Ves not only had to be precise, but also exert a lot of strength. Trying to do both at the same time without any practice was an enormous challenge.

"It's better if I get the technique right before I apply my strength."

With that thought, he carefully concentrated his mind and ran his spiritual senses throughout the seed.

He didn't detect the presence of any conscious or living entities. While the spiritual energy locked within the seed showed some traces of vitality, it was as likely as bacteria. It only offered a marginal amount of instinctive resistance to his pervasive intrusion.

"Interesting. If the spiritual accumulation is stronger, it might be able to hinder my intrusion."

His spiritual energy possessed remarkably different markings that wasn't compatible with the attributes associated with the Ylvainan Faith.

Ves worshipped mechs while the Ylvainans worshipped their Prophet and his predictions. When put together, of course the latter would feel affronted!

He took the context of the emergence of the Ylvainan Faith into account as well.

"Prophet Ylvaine lived during the twilight of the Age of Conquest. Even if some prototype mechs have already been developed at that time, they haven't achieved widespread exposure as of yet. This was still a time dominated by warships and weapons of mass destruction."

Some of the prophet's predictions possessed some relations to the circumstances of this time period. He said almost nothing about mechs before he was assassinated, which left the Ylvainan Faith with a lot of gaps when they adopted this new technology.

In fact, critics of the Ylvainan Faith pointed out this distinct gap in Prophet Ylvaine's predictions as proof that he was a charlatan.

If Prophet Ylvaine could really predict the future, why did he not say anything about the advent of the Age of Mechs?

"There's always an explanation." Ves muttered.

The standard retort of the Ylvainan Faith was to claim that the Prophet only uttered relevant predictions. While the rise of mechs was a historically-important turning point, it didn't change the essence of the Ylvainan Faith.

With this excuse, the Attendants of Ylvaine deflected any accusations that their prophet was just pulling predictions out of his butt based off his limited perspective of his time!

He turned his attention back to the seed. Regardless of whether the prophet was less than he claimed to be, his religion acquired a life of its own. The Grey Martyr and many other Ylvainans developed a sincere belief in the Ylvainan Faith.

"Even if the core of it is based upon lies and figments of imagination, it no longer matters. Belief is belief."

Ever since he arrived at the Protectorate, Ves discovered that strong belief sparked some strange interactions with spirituality. The church service at the grand church was a very significant event to him because he felt that the weak spirituality of tens of thousands of people began to resonate with a common frequency.

Ves managed to determine some of the attributes related to the Ylvainan Faith, though he lacked the sensitivity to identify their exact nature. Perhaps other faiths shared the same attributes, while others were exclusive to individual beliefs.

Identifying imprints was a lot easier than identifying attributes. Being able to do the latter required him to understand the makeup of spiritual energy on a very deep level.

Another way of describing these attributes was to equate them as flavors. Each flavor possessed a different quality. One was hot. One was cold. One was sweet. One was spicy.

Not every flavor fit in every circumstance. For example, if Ves wanted to drink some old-fashioned coffee, he didn't want it to be salty!

As for imprints, the best way that Ves could describe it was like leaving a scent on spiritual energy. Each person possessed a unique scent, and as long as Ves managed to associate a particular smell to an individual, he'd be able to recognize it anywhere.

Scent and flavor. While they possessed some relations to each other, they were still distinct.

"It's just a metaphor to make it easier for me to understand. I don't need to take it too seriously." Ves shook his head.

For now, Ves didn't intend to manipulate the flavors. He only wanted to remove all of the unwanted smells until the most pleasant one was left behind. Then he wanted to make the scent stronger so that it provided the same level of stimulation.

This was the simplest method he could come up with that would allow him to get what he wanted.

He recalled some of the procedures that Qilanxo's spiritual fragment performed and attempted to replicate the methods.

The outcome.. was both promising and disappointing.

"Looks like I'm too clumsy." Ves shook his head.

It was like trying to handcraft a miniature mech while possessing the limbs of an exobeast. He exerted too much strength at first. It was a lot more strenuous than he thought to suppress his Spirituality!

Not only was he having trouble controlling his strength, but his precision was abysmal as well. He felt like he returned to his youth where his mother handled him a data pad to play with. He remembered one game where he had to color the depiction of a mech with his fingers.

Being the little kid he was back then, he often splashed his colors across the lines of his mech, which resulted in a very smudged depiction!

Ves did not despair at these setbacks. He always knew his finesse was not up to snuff. "This is only the start. I don't believe I can train myself to improve in both aspects."

He became engrossed in his practice. This was the first time he was doing something so remarkable, so he cherished the opportunity to exercise his Spirituality in such a fine-grained manner.

An hour went by as Ves became engrossed in his experiments. Lucky hissed resentfully every now and then, but he remained vigilant and guarded against any spying and intrusion.

Although an hour was not a long time for practice, Ves was a fast learner. The procedure he attempted to do wasn't very complicated to begin with. He just needed to comprehend some tricks that made it easier for him to apply his Spirituality the way he wanted.

Once he managed to succeed once, it was a lot easier for him to replicate the process!

In fact, he already succeeded within the first thirty minutes, but only through chance. He spent the rest of his time refining his method and training his Spirituality into performing it with more precision.

He wanted to practice more, but he already wiped out all of the unwanted spiritual imprints for the seed's spiritual accumulation.

"I should proceed to the next step." He whispered as he momentarily rested his mind.

He was capable of removing unwanted imprints. The question right now was if he could apply the imprint that remained to the 'ownerless' spiritual energy.

"This is a very significant technique. There are many applications of such a powerful technique!"

Manipulating the imprint of spiritual energy was the key to forcing a mech pilot to advance to an expert candidate!

#### **Chapter 1194 Donning a Mask**

Ves already took the first step to mastering the techniques demonstrated by Qilanxo's spiritual fragment. If not for witnessing the processes up close, he wouldn't have a clue on how to begin!

"Not only that, but I wouldn't even know that something like this was possible in the first place!"

It could be said that what he witnessed when he redeemed Space Knight Mastery I from the system had broadened his horizons. He never even dreamt that it would be possible to artificially create an expert pilot!

Ever since then, Ves always wanted to replicate the process.

That was easier said than done. Not only was it rather troublesome to acquire spiritual energy, but even if he had some within his reach, his control and strength was but a shadow compared to Qilanxo's might.

He only gained some confidence when he advanced to Journeyman. While his Spirituality probably wasn't as strong as that of a Senior Mech Designer, he at least took some steps forward.

So far, he was right. After a bit of fumbling, he managed to wipe out the spiritual imprints of an uncountable number of Ylvainans!

He met very little resistance as he did so. Each individual imprint was weak, and Ves spent more care on limiting the scope of his actions so that he didn't spill and damage something important.

"If the spiritual accumulation only consists of one imprint, then it'll probably offer much more resistance." Ves muttered.

He recalled that Qilanxo's spiritual fragment donated a substantial amount of its own spiritual energy to encourage Eloise Pelican's apotheosis.

While Ves hadn't experimented on his own spiritual energy yet, he knew that he wouldn't face any resistance if he wiped off his own spiritual imprint.

He smirked. "It's my imprint. How can I resist myself?"

The only downside was that spiritual energy was quite precious! He hadn't even fully recovered from the losses he sustained when he donated a small chunk of his own spiritual energy to empower the images he created for the Ouroboros!

He treasured his loose spiritual energy, especially since not a lot of it was at his disposal after his design seed absorbed a large amount.

While the emergence of his design seed provided him with a lot of help, it also narrowed down his choices.

"Advancement is a process of specialization." Ves formed a guess. "Just like mech design, there's always a tradeoff. Becoming better at something means sacrificing versatility."

Fortunately, his advancement to Journeyman hadn't crippled his ability to manipulate spiritual energy. While he would probably never become a maestro in this field, what strength and control he acquired was sufficient to perform some limited procedures.

This made him wonder if his ability to manipulate spiritual energy in this fashion would strengthen or weaken over time. It would be bad for his future plans if his versatility further diminished as his design seed grew stronger and transformed.

"On the flipside, if my design seed becomes stronger, I'll become less dependent on external sources."

It was better if he could do everything himself. The whole reason why he was resorting to raiding the spiritual energy from valuable relics was because they could strengthen his ability to design his mechs.

He turned his attention back to the second step of his plan. He knew it was a lot trickier than his first technique.

"Destruction is easier than creation."

Some of the thoughts he held when he designed the Ouroboros still stuck in his mind. Destruction and creation were two sides of the same coin, but both possessed a lot of differences.

The act of removing someone else's spiritual imprint was akin to destruction. Ves didn't really need to wrack his mind over the technique because it was as simple as smudging his spiritual finger over the imprint.

However, putting another spiritual imprint in its place was a bit trickier. He couldn't apply his Spirituality in a hamfisted manner and expect to create something new in the form he wanted.

He needed to find a way to spread the Grey Marty's spiritual imprint to the ownerless mass of energy.

He developed several different approaches.

The simplest approach would be to see if the Grey Marty's spiritual imprints could 'contaminate' the larger cloud of ownerless spiritual energy.

Such a procedure also tested the nature of spiritual imprints. Was it something that existed in a fixed quantity, or could it spontaneously reproduce itself as long as there was enough space?

The other alternative would be to regard the act of replicating someone else's spiritual imprint as a process of mass production. Like a 3D printer running day and night, the only way for Ves to duplicate a spiritual imprint en masse was to put conscious effort into copying it over and over again.

The premise of this technique rested on the assumption that Ves was able to imitate the function of a 3D printer.

Ves tried to recall what he witnessed back then from Qilanxo's spiritual fragment.

"The first step is to wipe out the spiritual energy it freely donated to Eloise Pelican. The second step is to blend the huge cloud of ownerless spiritual energy with the strong emotions of the mech pilot."

Ves wasn't attempting to create an expert candidate or expert pilot this time. He didn't have access to a living Grey Martyr who could donate the thoughts and emotions that he required!

This left him with a gap where he couldn't blindly follow someone else's example.

He needed to solve the problem by developing his own solution.

"Well, here goes nothing."

He started with the simplest approach, which he much preferred over the other. If he could let the spiritual imprint do most of the work itself, then Ves didn't need to exert too much energy in encouraging the contamination process.

Hoping that it would work, Ves concentrated his mind and attempted to employ several ways to get the spiritual imprint tied to the original sentiment to jump out and contaminate the large cloud of spiritual energy that was right next door!

A frustrating half hour went by as Ves clumsily groped around. Often times, he applied too much force, which accidentally damaged the valuable spiritual imprint.

"I can't go on like this." He sighed and stopped what he was doing. "It's obvious that spiritual imprints can't propagate by themselves."

He was hopeful that his contamination theory was true, because he could just sit back and supervise the process if that was the case.

Instead, it seemed he needed to take a more active approach.

The only problem was that Ves didn't know where to start. He didn't know what a spiritual imprint was made of, let alone know how to replicate it if it belonged to someone else.

"It's easier if its my own imprint." He muttered.

According to what he saw back then, an imprint formed on spiritual energy after they blended with someone's thoughts and emotions. The imprint was basically a marker that claimed the spiritual energy to the originator of the thoughts and emotions.

This presented Ves with a clue.

"The thoughts and emotions of the Grey Martyr are well-documented."

Although Ves didn't pay close attention to the Grey Martyr's life back when he visited the grand church, he developed a pretty good picture of the man back when he was alive.

"If I replicate some of his thoughts and emotions, would I be able to do something with his imprint?" Ves wondered.

It was worth a try. Even if he failed, he would only ruin the spiritual accumulation of an insignificant seed at worst. He could still try something else with the commemorative medallion.

Having lived in the Ylvaine Protectorate for a couple of weeks, Ves developed a better understanding of the Ylvainan Faith than most citizens of the Bright Republic. While that didn't make him as knowledgeable as a devout Ylvainan believer who memorized all of Ylvaine's predictions and sayings by heart, he at least understood some of their core beliefs.

"The central belief of the Ylvainan Faith lies in their assurity that every form of life will transcend their mortal forms and ascend into godhood!"

This was a bold and radical assumption to make. There were so many implications and problems associated with this core belief that Ves didn't even know where to begin.

"Yet most Ylvainans don't express any doubt at all."

A Brighter like Ves would constantly doubt and question the validity of this radical belief. An Ylvainan would simply accept it as the truth. At best, some of the details might differ due to the variety of interpretations available, but most Ylvainans adhered to the most widely-accepted interpretation set by the Grey Martyr himself!"

That made things easier to Ves. He knew the basics of the Ylvainan Faith and he knew that the Grey Martyr's own personal beliefs didn't diverge that much from the mainstream interpretation.

What he did next was a little bit troublesome. In order to put the replication process in motion, he needed to provide the fuel in the form of his own emotions and thoughts.

It couldn't be his own emotions and thoughts. It was not his intention to impart his own scent on the spiritual accumulation of the little seed. What was the point of designing an Ylvainan mech when it carried the aura of a secular Brighter?

No. He needed to adopt the mindset that closely matched that of the Grey Martyr. He began to recall the lessons he learned when he toured the museum wing of the grand church.

"The Grey Martyr is first and foremost a teacher."

The man wasn't an academic at all. He grew up as an average citizen and never achieved anything remarkable before the prophet converted him in his later years.

He took on the role of teacher and interpreter because he wasn't capable of doing more.

"According to the records, the Grey Martyr was a curious man who constantly tried to find the hidden meanings in the predictions and sayings of the prophet. He also wanted to share his understanding with others in order to gain a better understanding of Prophet Ylvaine's original intentions."

Ves constructed an image of the Grey Martyr in his mind. He derived the man's original personality from the information he learned and added some of his own guesses along the way.

The image of the Grey Martyr became increasingly more rich. What Ves did right now was no different from forming an image to define the X-Factor for his mechs!

The only difference this time was that he wasn't going to put his image to use on a mech.

Once he was finished with the process, the image of the Grey Martyr was rich but largely hollow and insubstantial. It was just a figment of his imagination at this point.

Usually, the next step after forming the image would be to breathe life into it by imparting it with spiritual energy. The spiritual energy came from himself or from a spiritual fragment he scavenged from somewhere.

Not this time.

Ves developed a bold proposition. Instead of breathing life into an image, what if he breathed the image into his own mind? Would he be able to 'embody' the image and take on its personality and traits?

"It's like donning someone else's mask."

After a bit of fumbling, he figured out how to apply his ideas. He inflated the image and tried to merge it with his own mind.

Nothing drastic happened at first. He was still preoccupied with blending in the image to his mind, which wasn't easy as his mind did not wish to be encroached by a foreign personality!

He had to lower his mental defenses and use quite a bit of strength to merge the image with his mind. Even then, the process only happened gradually and tentatively.

Twenty minutes in, Ves noticed that his mentality had changed by quite a bit. When he thought back on the Ylvainan Faith, he found to his surprise that he instantly felt a lot of heartfelt devotion to the prophet!

He hypnotized himself into becoming a devout worshipper of the Ylvainan Faith!

### **Chapter 1195 Spiritual Food**

To personify an image was a surreal experience to Ves. His distinctive personality traits momentarily faded away. In its place sat the personality traits that Ves ascribed to the Grey Martyr.

Old. Calm. Devout. Inquisitive. Gentle. Hopeful.

It was as if he donned a spiritual mask that completely transformed him into another being.

"It's too bad that it's fake."

Ves quickly reasserted his true personality. The disparity in strength between the image of the Grey Martyr and himself was far too great.

It was like he was surrounding his Spirituality with a fragile water bubble. Just a single poke broke the illusion.

Even though the experience didn't impress him very much, he knew that there were a lot of potential applications for this technique.

"I've developed so many new spiritual techniques in a short amount of time."  
He sighed with awe.

His visit to the Ylvaine Protectorate already paid dividends on that account. Ves started to understand why Master Olson advised him to travel to different places.

Different cultures and customs forced him to move beyond his usual approach to mech design.

Different problems that he never faced before encouraged him to find new solutions that he would have never come up before.

He gained a sense of how a Journeyman should proceed after advancing from a lowly Apprentice. Their mech design abilities may have matured, but that didn't mean they became capable of solving every problem.

An Apprentice only possessed a small number of tools in their toolbox. Advancing to Journeyman didn't change that. If they wanted to become as formidable as a Senior, then they needed to climb upwards step by step, and one of the ways to do so was to increase the amount of tools in their toolbox.

Ves faintly had a premonition that the techniques he developed recently conformed to this process!

"Let's see if this latest technique is useful for my purposes."

After he recollected his composure, he began to don the mask once again. It took a lot of effort to subsume his old personality with another one. One of the biggest problems he faced right now was that the image of the Grey Martyr was far from complete.

"There are too many holes!"

Ves never really paid too much attention to the gaps in his construction, thinking of them as trivial, but only now did he feel how much he missed. His image of the Grey Martyr was only a superficial caricature that encompassed only a small portion of the real figure!

Nonetheless, he at least managed to include all the most important aspects. As long as no one looked too close, he at least possessed the surface demeanor of the Grey Martyr.

"Let's see if this masquerade can fool the spiritual imprint of the real person."

He focused his attention back on the preserved seed. It was difficult for him to do so because the real Grey Martyr would never do such a thing.

Ves faced an inherent contradiction. On one hand, he needed to personify the Grey Martyr. On the other hand, he needed to make use of his fake identity to perform the action his original self desired.

Trying to juggle between these two priorities took a lot of mental acrobatics.

Eventually, he managed to extend his spiritual senses to the preserved seed. He first identified the cloud of ownerless spiritual accumulation and pierced through it. Within the center of the cloud rested a tiny cloud of imprinted spiritual energy.

Ves did not reach out with his own spiritual energy this time. He knew that it was completely useless to do so because the mask he wore did not transform his Spirituality at all. It still carried his own spiritual imprint no matter how well he disguised it. Its essence hadn't changed.

However, what did change was his thoughts and emotions. He developed an inexplicable devotion to Prophet Ylvaine and his wild beliefs. These un-Ves-like thoughts polluted his mind and clashed against his own self-identity.

It wasn't good for his mental health to maintain this state for long.

He didn't dally around and poured out his thoughts and emotions towards the original sentiment of the Grey Martyr.

Something amazing occurred.

The original sentiment was like a puppy who lost its master. It was a remnant of a dead person, and therefore didn't possess much life. It was akin to a weak and miniscule spiritual fragment that didn't even have the strength to recognize the flaws in the mask that Ves currently wore!

His thoughts and emotions caressed the original sentiment and seemed to revitalize it a bit. The spiritual imprint gained life as well as it fed on the sustenance that Ves provided it. The original sentiment and the spiritual imprint began to grow stronger and livelier!

The only problem was that Ves felt as if he was draining a part of himself! While the expenditure wasn't very large, that was only because the original sentiment wasn't that big in the first place.

As the revitalization process continued, the original sentiment somehow noticed the spiritual accumulation around it and noticed that it was free for the taking!

The change happened quickly. Fueled by a boundless desire to live and grow stronger, the original sentiment began to assimilate the spiritual accumulation! Ves didn't fully understand the merging process, but he noticed that the drain on his thoughts and emotions increased!

"The spiritual imprint is expanding!"

The increased drain on Ves caused the spiritual imprint to grow and expand. It faced no resistance as it began to mark the free-floating cloud of ownerless spiritual accumulation as its own!

However, this process didn't proceed smoothly!

The cloud of spiritual accumulation encompassed spiritual energy with many different attributes.

Only some was to the spiritual imprint's liking.

A process of separation occurred. The spiritual energy that agreed with the spiritual imprint merged with the original sentiment while the spiritual energy with incompatible attributes were being pushed away.

A few minutes later, the process came to an end. The miniscule original sentiment had ballooned in size and became at least an order of magnitude stronger! Surrounding it was an expanding cloud of ownerless spiritual energy that was no longer bound in place. After being pushed away by the spiritual imprint, the worthless spiritual energy kept drifting away as if it had been evicted from its own home.

Ves wondered if he should absorb it for himself. After all, he still suffered from a deficit of spiritual energy.

He quickly shook his head. "I'm not sure whether any of its attributes are compatible to me. It would be a disaster if I try to assimilate the wrong type of spiritual energy."

For example, if Ves was a 'bitter'-flavored person, he would not do himself any good if he absorbed a 'sweet' flavor!

"In any case, I've succeeded!"

A jubilant mood swept over him as he quickly discarded his mask. The image of the Grey Martyr faded away into a corner of his mind as he beheld the preserved seed.

It turned out that one of his discarded theories was right after all. A spiritual imprint was a living entity, and the way to propagate it was to feed it with spiritual food and have a ready supply of ownerless spiritual energy nearby.

While the way to come up with the right spiritual food in the form of distinctive thoughts and emotions was rather troublesome, it was a lot easier as long as Ves knew enough information to construct the right mask!

A deep sense of satisfaction suffused his mind as he felt he made a lot of progress today. He developed a way to make use of historical relics to help in his mech designs.

While the expanded original sentiment of the preserved seed still wasn't strong enough to be of much use to Ves, this was merely an experiment!

As long as his methods worked on a small and insignificant historical relic, then it was definitely possible to do the same to something greater!

He stopped concentrating his mind and retracted his spiritual senses. His earlier experimentations drained quite a bit out of him. Everything had a cost, but Ves gladly paid the price!

"This seed is a lot more special now."

He beheld the preserved seed with his plain old eyes. Even without extending his spiritual senses, he felt an invisible weight surrounding the tiny object. It

was clear to him that its spiritual quality was a lot more concentrated and coherent than before!

Even if the total amount of spiritual energy had diminished by a lot, its purity was so strong that it more than made up for its losses!

This was what Ves intended to accomplish from the start!

"It's a shame to ruin this seed, but I really can't leave any evidence behind."  
He muttered while turning his head towards a vigilant-looking Lucky.

"Meow!"

After some ugly wrangling, Ves succeeded in stuffing the seed into Lucky's mouth. The cat instantly yowled and looked as if he wanted to barf out the contents of its artificial stomach!

If there was one thing Lucky hated eating the most, it was biological substances!

Ves had no sympathy for his cat. "Don't be so hysterical, Lucky. A bit of variety is good for your digestion!"

"Meow!"

He ignored the complaints of his pet and turned his attention to the commemorative medallion. This was obviously an object that the Grey Martyr valued more. Both the original sentiment and the spiritual accumulation were stronger than that of the preserved seed.

As long as Ves could replicate what he had just done, then he could do a lot of fantastic things with his next design!

He repeated all of his previous steps.

He wiped out the spiritual imprint on the heterogenous spiritual energy.

He donned the mask of the Grey Martyr.

He roused his thoughts and emotions and fed it to the original sentiment.

He supervised the process of assimilation and rejection.

Even though the commemorative medallion carried a lot more spiritual energy, Ves didn't face too many complications.

He only faced a challenge in the third step when he tried to fool the spiritual imprint in accepting his thoughts and emotions. The medallion's original sentiment was a lot stronger, and even in a dormant state it retained a bit more discernment.

"It's not that easy to fool the original sentiment of the medallion with a poorly-constructed mask."

Evidently, if Ves wanted to fool something even stronger, then he better make sure that he knew as much as possible about its original owner!

The overall strength of the medallion's spiritual energy also led to other complications, but Ves managed to deal with them without issue. The only concern he faced was that he was forced to expend a lot more effort and resources to finish the job.

Ves was practically exhausted by the time he held the remarkable commemorative medallion!

He looked at its dull luster and gained a lot more appreciation of this relic. It was a shame for him to ruin such a priceless artifact!

Yet Ves had no choice!

"Lucky! Come here! I've got another meal for you!"

"Meow!"

At least this time Lucky didn't suffer from as much indigestion. The commemorative medallion tasted as flavorless as nutrient packs, but at least it consisted of metals.

Ves curiously watched Lucky eat the medallion with a lot of reluctance. He turned on his spiritual vision to see what Lucky would do to the strong and focused spiritual energy locked within the medallion.

As soon as the medallion broke apart inside Lucky's stomach, the spiritual energy escaped and disappeared into the air.

It didn't seem as if Lucky absorbed any of it, which was a shame. Ves guessed that it must have drifted off in the imaginary realm.

"Well, at least the evidence is gone."

Ves felt no guilt at ruining three historical relics. It was a cheap price to pay for developing his new techniques!

The most important gain from these experiments was that he gained the tools he needed to tackle the problem he set for himself!

#### **Chapter 1196 Spiritual Toolbox**

His earlier experiments drained so much out of him that he quickly went to bed and slept for twelve hours straight. He only recovered his spirit the next day.

Ves was relieved he returned to normal after a long period of sleep. "If this is the price I have to pay to perform those techniques, then it's definitely a bargain!"

The only concern he held was that he only worked with some minor relics yesterday. If he wanted to do the same to a more valuable relic, then he might need to sleep for an entire week before he recovered from the ordeal!

"It's worth it as long as I can recover in the end."

What he gained out of this process far surpassed the price he needed to pay. Much of it was due to his strong Spirituality!

Although he already got rid the relics, he still remembered the sensations. The commemorative medallion particularly caught his eye. After all of the transformation, its strengthened original sentiment met the threshold for him to turn it into a spiritual fragment.

It was too bad that Ves had no use of such a spiritual fragment. The Grey Martyr was not a warlike person, so it was a bad idea to incorporate his spiritual fragment into any mech design geared towards battle.

Perhaps Ves would have a use for it if he wanted to design a display mech, an industrial mech or an agricultural mech. He didn't have the time to divert his attention right now, so he could only let it go.

During the entire morning, Ves summarized his results. He developed so many new techniques all of a sudden that he felt the need to introduce some structure.

As far as he knew, he developed six applications of Spirituality that had the potential to become his staple tools in his toolbox.

His Spiritual Senses formed the root of what he could do with his Spirituality. Without being able to sense, feel and observe what he was doing with his own Spirituality, he could never perform his other techniques! Possessing this ability provided him with a critical advantage that put him far ahead in this esoteric field!

Another ability he developed early on was his Spiritual Projection technique. To project his spiritual energy in the form of tentacles or some other shape allowed him to interact with other spiritual entities. Being able to extend his Spirituality and use it as a spiritual limb enabled him to act proactively rather than remain as an observer!

A more recent but vitally-important ability was his Spiritual Empowerment technique. Using his imagination to create an image only resulted in something hollow and lifeless. By infusing it with a spiritual fragment or his own spiritual energy, he was able to breathe life into an image, turning it from a figment of his imagination into something more substantial!

His Spiritual Empowerment technique was the key to imparting his mech designs with a stronger X-Factor!

The stronger he empowered his images, the higher the grade of X-Factor!

His next ability was his Spiritual Exploration technique. By sending his spirit out of his mind, he was able to dive into imaginary realm and explore the wonders contained within.

While the imaginary realm was largely empty and surrounded by a corrosive mist, Ves knew there might be a lot more dangers and treasures lurking within. Right now, the risks were too great for him to blindly stumble around in the imaginary realm, so he set it aside unless he needed to steal a spiritual fragment from someone.

His most uncertain technique was his ability to emulate an expert pilot's force of will. It didn't match the potency of the real thing, and Ves wasn't sure whether it was a good idea to perform this technique in the first place.

"I'm a mech designer, not a mech pilot."

This left him with his two newest abilities.

The first was what he called his Spiritual Imprint Manipulation technique. It encompassed a collection of methods to manipulate spiritual imprints.

Whether it belonged to himself or someone else, as long as he possessed the required amount of strength and control, he was able to erase a spiritual imprint or foster its growth.

The latter was only possible if he employed another technique at the same time. His newly-developed Spiritual Masking technique allowed him to don a spiritual disguise that could fool other spiritual entities.

While his flawed disguises wouldn't fool anything alive and intelligent, they were more than sufficient for him to fool a spiritual imprint that belonged to someone who was already dead for several centuries!

All of these techniques formed the tools he developed to accomplish his goals. They were so distinctive from his Skills and Sub-Skills related to mech design that they deserved to be placed in their own special spiritual toolbox!

The significance of forming this spiritual toolbox was very evident. For the first time since he adopted his design philosophy, he finally developed a basic but complete collection of all the tools he required to exploit his abstruse specialty!

A supreme sense of satisfaction overcame his mind and spirit, revitalizing them both. Even his design seed pulsed with pleasure!

"To a creator, there is nothing more valuable than owning a complete set of tools!"

If Ves ever documented his achievements in a textbook and released it to the public, it would definitely become a seminal work in the entire mech industry! In fact, it would not only open the eyes of mech designers, but also mech pilots and everyone else!

Of course, he would never do something so stupid!

"For now, I'll have to keep the gains to myself. There's no benefit for me to divulge my techniques."

At some point in time, that might change. Once he climbed up the ranks and gained the power and status to protect himself, he didn't mind giving back to the mech industry, especially if he stood to gain a lot of rewards in return.

"That won't happen for a very long time, I think."

He would probably have to advance to Master Mech Designer or Star Designer before he reached that point.

"What are you so glad about?" Ketis asked as she was petting a disgruntled Lucky.

The cat immediately left his owner's side after he was forced to eat the medallion.

"I've made some progress in my specialty." He answered honestly. He didn't want to cover up his satisfaction. "I've made a lot of breakthroughs that should help me design better mechs."

"What was your specialty again?"

"Metaphysical Man-Machine Symbiosis."

As expected, Ketis looked utterly befuddled. "Do I even want to ask any further?"

"Not everyone's specialty is simple." Ves explained. "It's also something private to us, so you should take care of how much you reveal to others. Not only will you give away the essence of your competitive advantage, but you'll also be harming those who aren't mature enough to learn your secrets."

She accepted the explanation. Ves had already warned her of the consequences of getting in touch with dangerous knowledge that posed a threat to her design philosophy.

"So are you confident you can do a good job now?"

He nodded. "I'm sure now that I can design a fantastic mech that can equal the Aurora Titan!"

"That would be very impressive!" She gasped.

Ketis probably had the mistaken impression that Ves didn't think he could equal the Aurora Titan because he didn't collaborate with a Senior this time. Ves didn't spare any effort to correct her misconception. The less she knew, the lower the risk of exposure.

What Ves was planning to do was going to be extremely dangerous. However, as long as he managed to pull it off, his mech design would definitely be able to astound the Ylvainans!

After he finished his breakfast and his morning routine, he called for Leon. He was often present at the guest compound in order to liaison for Madame Cecily.

"You called, Mr. Larkinson?"

"Yes." Ves calmly nodded. "I'm performing some research on Ylvainan culture right now. One thing I've noticed from our unfortunate visit to the grand church is that your people highly values relics. Why is that so?"

Leon bitterly smiled. "They are remnants of the pivotal figures of the Ylvainan Faith who have left us too early. We value their contributions and sacrifices. While most of the objects on display in the church aren't that impressive to a secularist like you, we Ylvainans believe that these relics allow us to connect to the great figures of our faith."

"I've never heard of that before."

"It's not exactly standard doctrine. It's more of a hopeful aspiration than anything else. The Attendants of Ylvaine are rather mixed on this issue because Prophet Ylvaine never said much about it. Most believers don't think

that much, though. As long as they are presented with a genuine relic of the prophet or one of his Martyred Followers, they are bound to pay their respects!"

"Kesseling VIII doesn't seem to host a lot of valuable relics." Ves remarked as he tried to steer the conversation into a particular direction.

"That's true. The Kesseling System isn't as strategic as some of the other star systems in the Protectorate. The Attendants of Ylvaine don't think it's worth it to invest a lot of relics here. The most significant relics are barely worth a glance if placed in the capital system of the Protectorate."

"Oh? Can you describe the most important one?"

"Sure. As you know, relics that are associated with Prophet Ylvaine are the most important to us by far. We are lucky that we have collected a lot of objects that the prophet once came in touch with, but most of it is locked away by the Attendants of Ylvaine. What little they put on display are rather meager."

"There's a relic of the prophet himself on display on this planet?"

"Yeah. As far as I know, there is a discarded nutrient pack wrapper on display at the grand cathedral!"

"A.. nutrient pack wrapper?"

Ves was distinctly unimpressed. Of all the objects that the Attendants of Ylvaine could put on display, they chose to enshrine literal trash?!

He already came in touch with discarded nutrient pack wrappers that belonged to the Grey Martyr, but they weren't very prominent!

Leon shrugged. "I know it sounds weird that the most important relic on our planet is a nutrient pack wrapper. However, it's better than nothing. The Poxco Dynasty don't want to expose anything more valuable, especially since our planet isn't all that important. Even if the relic isn't very impressive,

practically every Ylvainan born on this planet has paid a visit to the grand cathedral in order to pay tribute to the nutrient pack wrapper! It is the closest that any local Ylvainan can get to our prophet!"

Ves perked up when he heard that. Even though he looked down on some torn packaging of a disposable meal, the fact that the prophet once ate its content was enough for the local Ylvainans to deify it! Regardless of whether it was trash, the spiritual accumulation it gathered over the centuries must have grown incredibly formidable!

He bet that the quantity of spiritual accumulation would definitely surpass that of the Grey Martyr's commemorative medallion by at least an order of magnitude!

Ves quickly switched the topic to more mundane matters such as readying the mech workshop for his use. However, he never let go of thinking about the prophet's nutrient pack wrapper in his mind.

If he could steal the nutrient pack wrapper and process its spiritual accumulation, he might be able to extract a powerful spiritual fragment that possessed an undeniable connection to Prophet Ylvaine!

The things he could do with such a holy spiritual fragment! The Ylvainans probably never came in touch with something like this before! As long as he incorporated it in his upcoming hero mech design, which Ylvainan wouldn't drop to their knees and worship his mechs?

It was brilliant!

## Chapter 1197 Holy Relict

Kesseling VIII wasn't the only planet that enshrined the prophet's nutrient pack wrapper. The Attendants of Ylvaine collected hundreds of them during Prophet Ylvaine's lifetime.

The prophet was a lover of luxury and a gourmet who only ate the finest dishes. He didn't eat all that many nutrient packs, but there were plenty of times of difficulty where he had no choice but to fill his stomach in a hurry.

His followers collected each of the prophet's discarded nutrient pack wrappers after he was done with its contents. They even managed to preserve it all the way towards their flight to the Komodo Star Sector.

Once the survivors of the First Calamity founded the Ylvaine Protectorate, a question quickly arose on what they should do with all of the relics the Attendants of Ylvaine gathered.

They eventually decided to store the most valuable and fragile relics while putting the less important ones on display to rally the faithful. The presence of the relics served to affirm every Ylvainan that the prophet and his Martyred Followers actually existed once upon a time.

When it came to the relics that belonged to Prophet Ylvaine himself, the Attendants of Ylvaine were extremely stingy when it came to putting them on display. If anyone went crazy and tarnished them somehow, the Attendants of Ylvaine wouldn't be able to forgive themselves to the prophet!

For that reason, they reluctantly gave the public access to some of the most unimpressive relics imaginable.

The prophet's nutrient pack wrappers served as a decent solution to the problem because the Attendants of Ylvaine possessed a large amount of them. Even if someone stole or defiled one, the Attendants wouldn't cry too much because they possessed plenty more.

In any case, most average Ylvainans were already satisfied with getting in touch with anything that possessed a connection to their great prophet!

Ves couldn't predict what kind of spiritual fragment he might be able to refine from this relic. Although the relic wasn't significant, its previous owner was the

core of the Ylvainan Faith! Its spiritual accumulation must be so massive that it would definitely surpass most spiritual fragments!

The question that he faced was whether this spiritual fragment would be as strong as the one gifted by Qilanxo.

"Probably not. There's no way a normal human can equal the might of a Sacred God."

Prophet Ylvaine lived before the advent of mechs and mech pilots. While Ves couldn't rule out that the prophet somehow managed to develop some spiritual ability, what he learned so far painted a picture of a very persuasive individual.

Obtaining a spiritual fragment that was as strong as the spirituality of an ace mech pilot was highly unrealistic.

"Maybe I can address that shortcoming."

If he wanted to increase the strength of a spiritual fragment, then he would have to feed it with ownerless spiritual energy with compatible attributes.

With the new techniques he developed, it should be possible for him to do so. The only trouble was that he needed to obtain this ownerless spiritual energy from other relics.

This process consumed way too much time and resources for Ves to contemplate at the moment.

Another complication was that he might not be able to control more powerful spiritual fragment!

The only reason he managed to work with Qilanxo's spiritual fragment in the first place was because he possessed a friendship with the exobeast!

He still saved the idea in the back of his mind. Perhaps one day he would have the strength and opportunity to employ this method of empowering his spiritual fragments.

Ever since he made up his mind, he began to scheme to his next heist. Due to the recent terrorist attack, the security at the grand cathedral in Krent had been doubled or tripled.

The Protectors of the Faith feared the True Believers might want to launch a follow-up attack!

According to the recent news, many of the relics stored within the grand church had been moved to safety by the Attendants of Ylvaine.

Fortunately for Ves, the nutrient pack wrapper remained enshrined in a central position behind the dais of the grand cathedral. It was the most prominent object related to Prophet Ylvaine.

Everytime the grand cathedral held its service, the priests led everyone to worship the nutrient pack wrapper in order to bring them closer to their great prophet!

Some religions led their believers to worship the depiction of a man nailed to a cross, but to many Ylvainans, it was their greatest honor to receive an opportunity to worship a sacred nutrient pack wrapper!

This ritual gave Ves a lot of confidence that the relic accumulated a formidable amount of heterogeneous spiritual energy.

Due to the importance of this ritual to the Ylvainans living on Kesseling VIII, the Attendants of Ylvaine struggled for a long time before they decided to keep the nutrient pack wrapper in its place.

If they put it away and locked it in their deepest vaults, then the Attendants would instantly suffer a loss in reputation!

In any case, Ves happened to benefit from this decision. It would be a lot harder for Lucky to break into a high-security vault with many security measures and constant patrols.

To be sure, Lucky still faced a significant challenge in trying to steal the nutrient pack wrapper while it was in full view to everyone inside the main hall of the grand cathedral. This heist would be anything but simple.

During his planning, Ves contemplated whether he should employ an item from the System's Store.

"There should be some useful gadgets there. The only worry is the price I need to pay."

Ves hadn't seen how much DP he earned lately, but it must be a lot. The Aurora Titan was a very expensive mech, so even if the LMC and NORA Consolidated didn't sell all that much, the amount of DP they earned would still be a lot.

For now, Ves wanted to lay low for a time. It wouldn't do to rile up the Attendants of Ylvaine shortly after he had a chat with High Inquisitor Poxco and absconded with a couple of relics related to the Grey Martyr.

He turned his attention back to other matters, such as fleshing out his vision for his mech. Now that he determined its mech concept and its principal theme, he could proceed with locking in his vision for his mech.

Due to the spiritual fragment that Ves planned to obtain, it was definitely going to be a mech that personified Prophet Ylvaine!

This was no small matter. If Ves somehow made a mistake, the Attendants of Ylvaine would be sure to charge him with the crime of profaning the prophet!

Ves also didn't expect the spiritual fragment to be a relatively complete representation of Prophet Ylvaine's original personality. The Original sentiment attached to something as insignificant as a nutrient pack wrapper was nothing like that of something more important, such as the prophet's favorite robes or his comm.

Enlarging the original sentiment only amplified its flaws. Ves expected to obtain something that was very similar to the spiritual fragment he used in his Crystal Lord design, which had lost most of its unique traits over the long corrosion of time.

Thinking about that suddenly made him think about his mother.

Was he really pioneering the field of spirituality or was he merely reinventing the wheel?

The abilities his mother had shown during their brief contact seemed incomprehensively powerful.

Ves began to develop the notion that he may have inherited his strong Spirituality from his mother!

He began to feel a little depressed. It was obvious that his mother was much more proficient in wielding her spirituality than him. Perhaps the only advantage he possessed over her was that he was a mech designer while his mother was.. something else.

Too many questions swirled in his mind. This was why Ves hated thinking about his mother. He wasn't even entirely sure whether she was truly his mother or some sort of ghost that took over her identity.

Perhaps one bright spot in his life was that she hadn't shown up in the past few years. As much as he loved his mother, he would rather spend his time far away from her and her thieving hands.

"I've already grown up. I don't need my mother anymore." He affirmed to himself.

Even if he was a bit of a momma's boy in his youth, that was in the past. Once his mother died, he became a very different person.

The more he tried to dive into his mother's background, the more he questioned whether he was unique.

What if her relatives possessed the same abilities? Did they belong to a clan or a powerful family of sorts? Were they connected to the Five Scrolls Compact?

A swirl of disconcerting guesses haunted his mind. It took a lot of effort for him to push them all away before they consumed his entire thoughts.

He turned his attention back to other matters. His mech design was much more important right now.

At some point, Leland requested a private meeting with him. After they entered a room and activated a signal jammer, the spy revealed something important.

"I've been doing some snooping around and collecting various pieces of intel from our local informers. There are signs of major activity."

Ves narrowed his eyes. "What kind of activity?"

"Troop movements. Mech Movements." Leland quietly stated. "After the terrorist attack, the local economy has entered a major downturn. The rate of starship traffic should have decreased significantly, but for some reason a lot more ships are visiting the Kesseling System in recent days. Most of these ships happen to be cargo haulers and other high-volume trade vessels."

"Do you think the True Believers or some other force are shipping in assets?"

"I'm not sure. It's very hard to do so while the Protectors of the Faith have become a lot stricter in their inspections lately. Not a single trade vessel is allowed to deliver their cargo to Kesseling VIII without undergoing at least three separate inspections!"

The three times was necessary in order to guard against the possibility of traitors letting in dangerous weapons.

"What else explains the increased traffic?"

Leland wordlessly shrugged.

They couldn't think of any. It didn't make any sense to ship in large amounts of goods during this difficult period.

"Some spy you are." Ves frowned.

"Look, intelligence gathering is a very unreliable operation to begin with."

Leland mildly glared at him. "It's not as if we can give you all the hard facts you need around the clock. While Flashlight managed to develop a small network of informers in the Kesseling System, it has never been a high priority to us before. I am doing the best I can to warn you in advance that something might be afoot. Hasn't my previous warning already given you a heads up?"

Ves had to admit that Leland had a point there. "Alright. Maybe I'm being too harsh on you."

This satisfied Leland somewhat. "Aside from the unusual ship movements, I've also come in touch with something more unsettling."

"Oh? What is it that concerns you so much?"

"Apparently, the relations between the local Curins and Poxcos are deteriorating. The Kesseling System is firmly under the grip of the Curin Dynasty, but they've always lived in peace with the Poxcos."

"What's the dispute all about?"

"There are many minor disagreements, but one of the biggest issues that has blown up in recent days is that the Curins refused the entry of a batch of Poxcos!"

Ves could see why this might be a cause for concern. The Attendants of Ylvaine wanted to increase their presence in the Kesseling System, but how could the Curins allow their rival dynasty to encroach into their backyard?

The refusal to allow the Poxcos to increase their numbers in the Kesseling System therefore exacerbated the tension between the two dynasties.

If the situation continued to deteriorate, then the Poxcos might do something extreme!

### **Chapter 1198 Winds of Obsession**

According to Leland, the terrorist attack sparked a dispute between the Curins and the Poxcos.

The Kesseling System had always been the backyard of the Curins. However, the sudden emergence of the True Believers put their competence into question.

While the New Ylvaine Dynasty inflicted ruinous damage to an entire city district, the grand church that lay at the heart of it suffered the most!

Because all houses of worship fell under the supervision of the Attendants of Ylvaine, the Poxco Dynasty grew concerned about the safety of the remaining churches on Kesseling VIII.

"Did you think that someone as great as High Inquisitor Xefin Lin Poxco popped up out of nowhere?" Leland smirked. "He sneaked into the Kesseling System ahead of their main wave of reinforcements. The Curins are already aghast that a high inquisitor managed to arrive on this planet. They don't want the Poxcos to bolster their local presence any further."

Ves frowned at this and thought for a moment. "I can see why the Poxcos want to send more resources and manpower to Kesseling VIII if it looks like the True Believers are truly present. Yet what if the New Ylvaine Dynasty was

never involved in the first place? What if someone else faked their identity and committed a false flag attack?"

Both of them grimaced to each other.

"That sounds like an arsonist setting fire to a house before arriving to as a fireman to put out the blaze." Leland commented.

Creating a problem and solving it yourself. It sounded dumb, but it was a popular way for state actors to earn some goodwill. As long as the actor put on a disguise and managed to deflect the blame, they could pose as the knight in shining armor coming to the rescue!

They didn't know nearly enough to speculate over this issue. Ves didn't have anything but wild guesses to go on while Leland only heard some scattered rumors from unreliable informers.

Ves became increasingly aware of the importance of a good intelligence network. Spending time with the likes of Calabast and Leland taught him that as long as he possessed a good intelligence network, he'd be able to smell trouble coming his way.

This sounded a lot better than letting trouble blindside him all the time!

In any case, despite Leland's lack of means, the warnings he passed on to Ves still served a useful role. At the very least, he became aware of increasing local tension between the Curins and the Poxcos.

"Do you think the Poxcos will succeed in getting their reinforcements through?" Ves suddenly asked.

"I'm not sure." Leland mused. "As long as the True Believers show up again, then it will become very hard for the Curins to claim they have the situation under control."

That was bad news. If the arsonist didn't get what they want out of the first fire, they would just have to spark another fire!

Not only did Ves remain under threat, but the Poxcos would also be able to strengthen their security in all of their major churches.

This likely included the grand cathedral which hosted the holy relic that Ves wanted to obtain!

A sense of hurry swept over Ves. He had to obtain Prophet Ylvaine's nutrient pack wrapper before the Poxco's locked down the grand cathedral!

He originally planned to stall for a week let some of the heat die down, but it seemed he couldn't wait that long!

After Leland finished relaying his intel, Ves sat alone in his room at the guest compound with Lucky.

He contemplated his decision for a moment and decided to go through with it despite the potential risks associated with stealing the holy nutrient pack wrapper.

At the very least, its theft would impact Kesseling VIII significantly.

Ves could foresee that the Curins would suffer most of the blame. They wouldn't be able to stop the Poxcos from sending reinforcements to the Kesseling System. In fact, regardless of what the Curins did, the Poxcos would probably be driven mad as soon as they heard a holy relic that used to belong to the prophet himself went missing!

Even though a single nutrient pack wrapper wasn't very important in the greater scheme of things, the Attendants of Ylvaine were extremely obsessed with anything related to the prophet. For it to get stolen would not only alarm the Poxos, but also the rest of the Protectorate!

"No one must ever find out!"

The risk of exposure was incredibly damaging to Ves. As long as the Attendants of Ylvaine suspected that he may be involved, the high inquisitor would execute him directly for affronting the Ylvainan Faith!

Leland already warned him about the consequences of attacking the Ylvainan Faith. It didn't matter if Ves was a foreigner who was exempt from some of the laws that targeted nonbelievers.

Still, despite the unfavorable consequences that might ensue if Ves proceeded with his plan, it was for a good cause!

"As long as I'm able to design the mech I've envisioned, then all of these troubles will pay off!"

It came down to whether Ves valued his work highly enough to take the risk. He knew he was about to cross a very dangerous line at this junction, but how could he resist the lure of designing an unprecedented mech?

As long as he was able to refine a spiritual fragment that contained Prophet Ylvaine's imprint, then he'd definitely be able to open up a new dimension of mech design, one that the galaxy had never seen before!

When Ves thought about the innovation he'd be able to accomplish, his mind, spirit and design seed all grew hot and excited.

He'd be able to make huge strides with his design philosophy as long as he proceeded!

"I think I understand now why mech designers can be so intense sometimes."

The shadow of a very eccentric Senior flashed through his mind.

Yet despite the disconcerting reminder, Ves didn't think he was doing anything wrong. As a mech designer, he would do anything for his mech designs!

"I love my mechs too much to restrain myself!"

The winds of obsessions swept around into his mind. They found fertile ground inside. The temptation was too great for him to resist!

However, even if Ves planned to go through with his plan, he still took the time to prepare the heist.

He surreptitiously browsed the galactic net and downloaded a recent tourist guide book on Kesseling VIII. He then cut his comm off the galactic net and began to browse its extremely extensive section on the Grand Cathedral of Ylvaine's Mercy.

While the virtual guide book didn't map out the restricted sections of Ylvaine's Mercy, it offered its readers an extremely detailed three-dimensional of all of its public areas!

Ves forced Lucky to study the map despite the cat's grumpiness.

"Meow meow!"

"I know I haven't been treating you well lately, but please bear with it. As long as I'm able to get what I want, I'll spend a billion credits on exotics for you to munch on! I'll even let you select your own dishes!"

"...Meow?" Lucky tilted his head.

"I'm completely serious, I swear!"

"Meow..."

"What, you think I'm lying?"

"Meow!"

"Oh come on, I'm trustworthy! I would never cheat you!"

It took several minutes for Ves to convince Lucky that he would uphold his end of his bargain. It seemed that even his cat began to question his honesty!

Nonetheless, Ves didn't intend to fudge his promise this time. Paying a billion credits to obtain the key to designing a great mech was a small price to pay! It wasn't as if he was hurting for money these days!

Lucky deserved this reward if he managed to pull off the heist. Although the grand cathedral's security had been beefed up in recent days, the Protectors of the Faith mostly guarded against mechs and infiltrators.

They never encountered a mechanical cat that could phase through solid objects and possessed an extremely powerful CFA-grade ECM system!

This combination practically turned Lucky into the perfect thief!

The only shortcoming was that his cat didn't possess a means to go invisible. Even though he was harder to spot in an incorporeal form, Ves still found Lucky's appearance to be too distinctive in this state.

"If we don't want to get caught, you need something that can hide you for a time."

After some reluctance, Ves decided he couldn't avoid spending his DP any longer. He activated his Privacy Shield before activating the System. He briefly looked up his status to learn how much DP he accrued lately.

"What?! I've earned almost 600,000 DP!"

It took a bit of time for him to realize why he earned so much money. He only received a moderate bump in DP due to selling physical copies of his new Aurora Titan design.

Most of the DP he earned in recent weeks actually came from selling virtual copies of the Aurora Titan!

Just because the mech was unaffordable to most people in reality didn't mean it was unaffordable in the virtual realm!

Gavin already mentioned how many mech pilots tried out the Aurora Titan in Iron Spirit and other simulation games. The new mech model attracted so much attention that many mech pilots wanted to find out if it could help them advance!

While nothing so dramatic happened, many mech pilots actually took a lot of liking of the Aurora Titan despite its steep learning curve. Even those who didn't specialize in space knights or spaceborn mechs couldn't help but fall in love with piloting the virtual version of the mech!

"It's no wonder the virtual version of the Aurora Titan immediately hit the 250,000 DP limit!"

The System didn't consider virtual mechs to be worthy of much attention. Setting an upper limit of 250,000 DP on earnings from virtual sales was obviously meant to discourage him from becoming a full-time virtual mech designer.

If not for this limit, Ves would probably be able to earn a million DP with ease!

Nonetheless, Ves still gnashed his teeth at the thought of missing out on all of that surplus DP!

In any case, his DP reserves were so ample that he changed his original plan. He originally wanted to spend some DP to purchase a one-time standalone stealth augment.

However, considering that this probably wouldn't be the last time for him to steal an important historical relic, Ves thought about pairing Lucky with a permanent stealth upgrade.

Amazingly enough, Ves found something perfect for the occasion.

[Miniaturized Stealth Generator - Level 1]

Price: 400,000 DP

Duration: 5 Minutes

Emit a small overpowering field that disrupts any means of observation within a 1 meter sphere. It is capable of obfuscating every possible means of observation that is known to the Mech Designer System.

"400,000 DP!"

The enormous price tag made him wince. Ves considered whether he would be better off placing his System comm around Lucky's neck and make use of its Full Stealth Augment instead. Ves wouldn't be forced to spend any extra DP in that case.

"It's too risky!"

If anything went wrong, Ves might lose the System! Even though he recently Inventorized it, he might not be able to dematerialize it if it fell into the hands of the Ylvainans.

In order to guard against any accidents, it was safer for Ves to invest in Miniaturized Stealth Generator and provide Lucky with an independent means of entering stealth.

"Now that I think about it, this price doesn't sound so unreasonable."

Although its duration was very short before it required a lengthy recharge, its capabilities definitely surpassed Lucky's excellent ECM systems!

As long as Ves paired his cat with this little gadget, they could use it over and over again. At some point, he'd be able to earn back what he spent!

"It's an investment for the future." Ves muttered as he pulled the trigger and bought the Miniaturized Stealth Generator.

As soon as he confirmed his purchase, an object that resembled a comm materialized in front of him. Ves took the slim object and clasped it around Lucky's neck like a collar.

"Do you like your new collar?"

"Meow!"

### **Chapter 1199 Contributing Mech Designer**

Ves felt a lot of heartache when he sent Lucky off to perform the heist.

Spending 1 billion credits to motivate Lucky into breaking into the grand cathedral didn't concern Ves very much. With how much profit the LMC was making these days, he could afford to spend that much money like water.

The same didn't apply to Design Points. Accumulating 400,000 DP took a lot of effort. Ves practically spent all the DP he earned from his Aurora Titan design.

"It took seven months of earnest effort for me to design the Aurora Titan." He muttered.

Even if the Miniaturized Stealth Generator opened up a lot of new possibilities for Ves and Lucky, Ves constantly wondered if he could have spent his DP on something better.

The amount of DP he spent in an instant was too abrupt for Ves to feel at ease!

In fact, he wanted to be close to the grand cathedral as well in case Lucky hit a snag.

He couldn't. Not only did the Curins restrict his movements, it was an enormously bad idea for him to be in the vicinity of the Grand Cathedral of Ylvaine's Mercy during the heist.

He was already present at the Grand Church of the Grey Martyr during the terrorist attack. He would definitely attract High Inquisitor Poxco's suspicion if he strayed near the grand cathedral during an attempt to steal its most valuable relic!

The Ylvainan Inquisition only needed a reasonable amount of suspicion to take him into custody. Who knew what they would do to him once he ended up in their dungeon!

Ves just had to put his faith in Lucky's abilities. His naughty pet had a lot of practice stealing valuable minerals, so Lucky should know what he was doing.

The Miniature Stealth Generator he received was like adding wings to the tiger! There was hardly anything that could stop Lucky from stealing something now that he gained the ability to hide himself from every form of observation!

Even if it only lasted five minutes, if paired with his ability to turn intangible, that was all the time that Lucky needed to infiltrate most strongholds!

Now that Ves thought about it, Lucky could easily use his new ability against him! Nothing would be able to stop Lucky from stealing and eating his own stuff!

"Did I create a monster?"

Ves trusted Lucky more than his friends and family. As far as he was concerned, his cat was his closest companion.

Lucky was the only entity who knew all of his secrets!

Even though humans didn't put a lot of trust in AIs and mechanical pets, Ves knew there was something very special about Lucky. Despite his artificial form, Lucky differed from every other pet due to possessing his own spirituality!

He often puzzled why Lucky possessed this strength, especially in the early days of his career.

As Ves developed a greater understanding of spirituality, he no longer found it incomprehensible.

"Life isn't bound by an organic form. It can emerge from any shape as long as the conditions are right."

As Ves waited for Lucky to return, he decided to turn his attention back to his mech design work. It would be best if he acted normally during this time in order to allay any possible suspicion that he was involved with the upcoming theft.

He called Ketis over.

"What's the matter, Ves?"

"For our upcoming design project, I'm willing to let you be involved." He said once they sat down. "It's no secret to you that I'm working on a hero mech design. Considering your specialty and your familiarity with swordsmanship, I think your input is very helpful to our current design project."

"You're willing to let me have a say in the design?"

"Yes." Ves nodded. "As long as your suggestions and corrections are sound, I don't mind crediting you as a contributing mech designer to this project. It will do you a lot of good if you are able to meet that threshold!"

There was a substantial difference between a contributing mech designer and an assisting mech designer!

Assisting mech designers were basically coolies and number crunchers. The leading mech designer would never allow them to make any important decisions.

In contrast, a contributing mech designer earned the right to make some meaningful design choices. As long as the leading mech designer approved of their decisions, their judgement affected the overall direction of the design project!

This was a great honor to a Novice like Ketis. So much so that even she didn't believe that a control freak like Ves actually meant what he said.

"You wouldn't be pulling my leg this time, will you?" Ketis asked with eyes narrowed in suspicion.

"I'm not attempting to coddle you or anything." Ves reassured her. "While you're still a Novice, that's only because you haven't completed any significant mech designs yet. Your knowledge base has improved a lot and you've spent a lot of time on diving deeper into subjects related to your design philosophy. Combined with your extensive exposure to the Swordmaidens and your personal swordsmanship skills, you've got a lot more practical experience than me when it comes to this area."

While Ves possessed an extensive amount of theoretical knowledge on melee mech combat, it was better for him if he had a specialist in this field by his side.

Once Ketis began to accept that Ves wasn't joking, she immediately grew enthusiastic. "I'll help!"

"Good. Please take a look at my loose draft and see if there is anything that stands out. I haven't decided what type of sword fits best for my hero mech."

As Ves showed her a projection of his schematic, Ketis hummed for a while. She'd already been introduced to its mech concept.

"This high-impact mech is much like the Silver Valencia the Swordmaidens used to field. Do you remember?"

"Of course." Ves nodded.

He could hardly forget about the signature mech of the Swordmaidens. The most iconic memory he possessed about the premium swordsman mech was

how a dozen of them dogpiled Venerable Foster's Belisarius and self-destructed at the same time.

Despite their valiant sacrifice, the Vesian expert mech didn't incurred any serious damage! Its defensive and regenerative abilities were too disgusting!

Ketis continued her explanation. "The Silver Valencia is an upgraded version of our Devil Razor model. What they both share in common is that they're fast, flexible and strong. Mayra experimented with pairing our Devil Razors and Silver Valencias with many types of swords before settling for a broad, straight sword. Its strength and heft makes it suitable for hacking shields and tough exteriors."

"I don't think my hero mech needs to wield something so cumbersome. I'm operating on a very generous budget for this commission. We can make use of very strong alloys to pair my hero mech with a slimmer sword."

"I don't think that will fit with your design." She shook her head. "With the strength your hero mech is capable of exerting, it should do fine with a smaller sword, but it's really a waste of its potential to me. You want to design a high-impact mech, right? To me, your hero mech is more like a juggernaut than a fencer. Pairing it with a strong and hefty sword allows it to forgo any fancy techniques and instead rely on pure strength to overcome its opponents."

Ves frowned a bit. That didn't sit very well with his original intentions.

"My original intention is that my mech should provide ample space for the mech pilot to exploit their considerable skills. I tried to achieve a good balance between finesse and brute force."

"I don't think that's the way to go here." She shook her head. "An ordinary swordsman mech wouldn't be troubled because it can adapt with its entire mech frame. It's different with your hero mech because the other half of its

frame is dedicated to operating a rifle. That pretty much limits the amount of finesse your hero mech can display."

It became clear that Ves hadn't put enough thought between balancing force and finesse. The high-impact mech he envisioned should possess a lot of speed, but his draft design incorporated a lot of flexibility in order to provide his mech with a lot of room to perform advanced techniques.

However, according to Ketis, that should be necessary.

"I don't think it's worth the effort to add all of that extra agility and weaken the structural integrity of your mech as a consequence. It might not seem as if momentum-based combat is very complicated, but it's far harder to pull off in practice because you need to plan your moves ahead."

Ves recognized where he made a mistake. He initially designed his draft design not too long after returning from his latest Mastery experience.

Witnessing a Terran mech pilot operate his mech in combat gave him a warped perspective on what a mech pilot was capable of. Ves unconsciously designed a mech with Terran design sensibilities by giving the mech pilot too many options at the cost of overall integrity of the mech.

While the Terrans tried to encompass as many fighting styles as possible, the mech designers of the galactic rim always chose to give up versatility in favor specialization!

Ves appreciated Ketis for pointing out this oversight. While his design choice didn't turn his hero mech into trash, it wasn't very optimal either.

After some thought, he decided to put his trust in Ketis. "I'll let you try and decide what sword is best for the hero mech. No matter if its a rapier, a broadsword, a scimitar or whatever, as long as you have a good explanation, I'll accept your design choices!"

"I won't disappoint you, Ves!"

He transferred some of his design files to Ketis and packed her off after giving her some instructions.

This would be the first time he made use of a subordinate mech designer in this fashion. Ves felt as if a weight lifted off his shoulders. By passing on some responsibilities to another mech designer, he no longer depended exclusively on his own judgement.

"I should flesh out my design team with other specialists."

He thought about Carlos for a moment. Hopefully, his old friend would be able to get over his jealousy.

While Carlos didn't sound as if he locked in his design philosophy, a mech designer who specialized in heavy guns was very useful to Ves when he wanted to design a ranged mech.

"Both Ketis and Carlos can help me design the offensive aspects of my mech."

If Ves wanted to round out his design team, then he should add mech designers who specialized in defense and mobility. As long as he completed his collection, he'd be able to adopt a different style of mech design where he could entrust his subordinates to perform the bulk of the actual design work.

Even if he lessened his involvement, with his growing Spirituality, Ves was sure he'd be able to maintain the strength of the X-Factor of his designs.

His current decision to give Ketis an opportunity to contribute to his mech design was both an experiment and a time-saving decision. As long as Ketis made some successful contributions, Ves knew that he could proceed with involving other mech designers in his design projects.

At this time, a loud alarm sounded outside. Every Ylvainan outside thought that something disastrous would take place and quickly ran for shelter.

At the same time, the Protectors of the Faith who guarded the guest compound began to enter a state of higher alertness. Every Kronon mech pilot who was off-duty all donned their piloting suits and boarded their dormant mechs!

"What's going on?!"

Gavin quickly arrived at his room.

"Ves! It's a disaster!"

"Do you know what happened?"

"I just managed to read the news before the Ylvainans locked down the galactic net. Apparently, the True Believers broke into the grand cathedral and stole their holy relic!"

Ves widened his eyes. That must have been Lucky! But why did the Ylvainans suspect the True Believers were behind the theft?

### **Chapter 1200 Contradictory Innocence**

On second thought, Ves understood why the earliest news reports pointed the finger at the True Believers.

The New Ylvaine Dynasty had already been accused of attacking the Grand Church of the Grey Martyr. For them to pull off a dramatic stunt at the Grand Cathedral of Ylvaine's Mercy shortly after their first attack made a lot of sense!

It was as if the living prophet wanted to mock the three leading authorities by exposing their incompetence in this manner!

As alarms kept ringing throughout the city of Krent, Ves and Gavin quickly noticed that the Ylvainans took this incident a lot more seriously than they expected.

A priority notification quickly appeared on their comms.

"Kesseling VIII has declared martial law!" Gavin gasped as he read some of the text. "All aircars, shuttles and other vehicles are not allowed to fly. All forms of transportation in Krent is immediately shut down! No shuttles, starships or any other spacefaring vessel is allowed to depart the Kesseling System! Any starship that is scheduled to travel to the Kesseling System must immediately cancel their journey! Martial law will stay in effect for at least a week and can be extended at any time!"

Ves widened his eyes. "What the hell? The entire planet and star system will grind down to a halt if all traffic is blocked for an entire week! The local economy will definitely enter a depression at this rate!"

"I don't think the Ylvainans care about that anymore." Gavin nervously uttered. "Don't you realize what's at stake? The grand cathedral lost a relic that used to belong to the founder of the Ylvainan Faith! That's an enormous crime in their books!"

Even if the grand cathedral lost a nutrient pack wrapper, it was still an extremely valuable relic to the Ylvainans! To the Attendants of Ylvaine, the relic's value surpassed almost everything else on the planet!

Due to their failure to stop the theft and prevent the culprit from making off with the relic, the Protectors of the Faith drummed out in huge numbers. The streets emptied out of all civilian traffic, allowing scores of mechs and armored shuttles to sweep the streets and structures for any unusual elements.

The guest compound didn't escape scrutiny either. A bunch of Protectors of the Faith performed a deep search of the entire compound. They even dug into their luggage to see if they carried anything suspicious!

Alongside the extensive search, a Protector captain personally interviewed Ves and his followers.

"Are you involved with the True Believers?"

"No." ves replied truthfully.

"Are you involved with any incidents that took place at the Grand Cathedral of the Ylvaine's Mercy?"

Ah hell. Ves wanted to lie, but he knew that he'd get caught out by the lie detector system if he said no. If he attempted to perform some verbal acrobatics, then he might arouse the Kronon officer's suspicion.

That would be devastating to Ves! As long as they turned their attention to him and interrogated him more vigorously, they would definitely be able to determine that he was guilty!

Time seemed to slow down as Ves considered a myriad of solutions. He faced a similar situation before when an investigator of the CFA interrogated him. Ves remembered that he employed an unrefined spiritual trick to make him seem innocent.

Could he use something like that again?

There wasn't any time to consider anything else!

Different from last time, Ves came up with a more refined version to make him seem innocent. He rapidly constructed an image of himself in his mind. Because he knew himself quite well, he managed to complete the image in an instant.

The only difference of this image and his actual self was that he deliberately made it innocent. It possessed absolutely no involvement with anything related to what had happened at the grand cathedral!

There wasn't anymore time for him to refine his image of his innocent self any further. If he paused too long, the Protector captain would definitely form his own conclusions!

"What exactly happened at the grand cathedral?" Ves spontaneously asked. He needed to buy some time to complete his plan! "I heard that something got stolen?"

"I'm asking the questions here, Mr. Larkinson. Please answer the question. Are you involved with any incidents that took place in the grand cathedral?"

While the Protector captain sternly gave out his warning, Ves used the time to empower his image with his own spiritual energy.

Although Ves was loath to spend his spiritual energy, it was a necessary price to pay! Once the image of his innocent self came to life, Ves expanded it and swept it over his mind as if he was donning it like a mask.

Ves jerked a bit and quickly calmed down. This was the first time he donned an empowered image like a mask!

The difference was palpable! There was a lot more substance to his mask now, and because the image largely consisted of himself, there was very little incompatibility!

Ves innocently smiled. "I'm sorry. I heard some news from my assistant and I couldn't help but grow curious. To answer your question, I'm not involved in any incidents that has happened at the grand cathedral. I've never visited the place."

A strange mood overcame Ves as he wore his mask. A duality of thoughts clashed in his mind.

On one hand, he was very much the culprit that provoked the Ylvainans into a frenzy, to the point of declaring martial law!

On the other hand, he was just an innocent mech designer who had no relations with any crimes that took place on Kesseling VIII!

Such a conflict would have ordinarily clashed within his mind, but for some reason Ves was able to hold both of them at the same time!

This was clearly a contradiction, but nevertheless Ves was able to maintain his false innocence down to his facial expressions, his heartbeat, his eye movements and other signs! This allowed him to fool even the most sophisticated lie detectors!

The Protectorate captain continued to interrogate him. Despite his sternness, his suspicion towards Ves had faded as he didn't detect anything amiss.

"I hope you'll find the culprits to this awful incident." Ves wished the Protectors of the Faith luck. "Whoever stole your holy relic deserves to suffer the most awful punishment your state has in store! What audacity! I'd like to beat up the culprit myself for making it harder for me to do my business on this planet!"

The Protectorate captain seemed fully convinced of Ves' sincerity. "Thank you for your understanding, Mr. Larkinson. I am sorry to say that we may impose further restrictions to you and your staff. Please do not take any offense if we seem rude if we take any precautionary measures."

"I understand. I hope you'll find the thieves soon so we can all get back to normal."

Once the Protectorate captain left, Ves inwardly sighed and slowly removed his spiritual mask. The empowered image of his innocent self shrank in size and floated peacefully within his mindscape.

"Can I recycle it? It would be great if I can get back what I spent."

However, he quickly decided against this course of action. Much like his other images, the image of his innocent self wouldn't degrade anytime soon. It also didn't exert any strain on his mind.

Considering that Ves might be facing several more interrogations in the coming days, he might need to resort to the same solution again. It would be a waste for him to create a new mask when he already possessed a serviceable one!

Since he could store his disguise in his mind without any consequences, he might as well keep it around.

He smirked. If the high inquisitor paid a visit to him again, he'd be fully prepared to declare his innocence!

As time went by, Ves tried his best to return to developing his draft design. He couldn't show any signs that he was involved in the matter of the grand cathedral.

Lucky already received instructions to lie low for a few days after he accomplished his heist. Ves didn't want to take the risk of getting caught red-handed during the period where the Ylvainans were on high alert!

"I made the right decision!"

Ves vastly underestimated the Ylvainan response to the theft. It was as if their entire society had been upended! As several hours passed, the manhunt for the thief intensified. Practically every peace-keeping mech was on the streets, and plenty of military mechs had joined the search as well!

Sporadic fighting erupted all across Krent as the Protectors of the Faith and the Attendants of Ylvaine occasionally bumped into something shady during their invasive door-to-door searches.

A lot of shady organizations on the planet suffered enormous losses due to the Ylvainan overreaction!

Even in a religious state, gangs and other unsavory elements still thrived. The only difference was that the criminal underworld didn't operate so blatantly in their territories.

Yet no matter how much they kept their shady dealings out of sight, the Ylvainans still possessed many of the same needs as Brighters and Reinaldans!

In fact, Ves suspected that many of Leland's informants consisted of gang members. They would do anything as long as they received enough money.

During martial law, most of the galactic net had closed down. Only approved outlets could still be accessed. In this case, Ves could only choose between news slanted towards the Curins, Kronons or Poxcos.

Obviously, the Poxcos were absolutely allopathic at the theft of Prophet Ylvaine's nutrient pack wrapper!

To their credit, they didn't deny their failure to safeguard the holy relic. They admitted their shortcomings but simultaneously stated the need for more Poxcos on the planet to assist in the search.

"Looks like the Poxcos will definitely get what they want this time!" Ves concluded.

The statements published by the Curins deflected a lot of blame towards the Kronons and the Poxcos for failing their duties. They tried to minimize their guilt as much as possible, and they actually did a decent job at it considering that they weren't responsible for guarding the relic in the first place.

Despite their objections, Ves didn't think the Curins would be able to stop the Kronons and Poxcos from inserting more men and mechs onto Kesseling VIII. If the terrorist attack already alarmed them, then the theft of an important relic had definitely sent them in a frenzy!

As for the Kronons, they slowly started to back the Poxcos. As their mechs and troops provided much of the security for the grand cathedral, they suffered a lot of blame for their failures. The Kronons wanted to atone for their mistakes by reinforcing the Kesseling System with an entire regiment!

And that was only what the Kronons admitted to the public. Who knew how many assets they planned to shift the Kesseling System!

The situation was growing increasingly hot to Ves. As the chief mastermind behind the theft, all of this was bad news to him. An escalation of troops might result in something worse.

Ves merely wanted to design a mech in peace. Why were the Ylvainans making it so difficult for him to do his job and complete the commission?

A very tense day went by before Calabast arrived at the guest compound in person under heavy guard.

"Miss Cecily!" Ves greeted her with surprise at that morning. "How come you're here?"

"We need to discuss our changing circumstances. Let's talk somewhere private." She said in a terse tone.

Ves led her to his room where she immediately activated her signal jammer.

That wasn't enough for Calabast this time because she deployed another machine that surrounded the both of them with a weak but highly disruptive energy field.

Only after she prepared all of her precautions did Calabast turn her attention to Ves.

"Tell me the truth, Ves. Did you do it? Did you steal the holy relic?"

Ves immediately donned his innocent mask. He expected that he'd be forced to don his mask again, but not against Calabast!

"I'm not involved, I swear! I didn't do it! I'm innocent!"

Calabast grimaced as she scrutinized his entire body. "I don't believe you."

"What?! But I don't have anything to do with it this time!"

"Don't lie to me, Ves! It's no coincidence that you asked me to obtain a relic earlier this week. Don't think I don't know that some of the Grey Martyr's relics inexplicably went missing. Now something like this happens at the same time that your mechanical pet has gone missing during this timeframe. No matter how innocent you seem, there are gaping holes in your story!"

Damnit! Ves quietly cursed Calabast for her astuteness. His innocent act hadn't worked at all!