

### Chapter 1201 Too Astute

"You stupid kid! Do you have any idea what you've brought on this planet?!"

This was the first time Ves saw Calabast losing control over her impeccable composure. He didn't have to puzzle or second-guess his judgement to determine that the woman was furious!

What Ves found more alarming was that his mask of innocence failed to work on the astute spy. No matter how clueless he appeared, he couldn't do anything about the clues that Calabast pieced together!

This was a fatal flaw that Ves hadn't fully considered!

Ves tore away his mask seeing as it didn't do him any good. A subtle change in demeanor swept over him. He no longer appeared meek.

"I had to do what I needed in order to design my next mech." He said with little remorse.

"VES!" Calabast raged. "If you wanted to obtain a relic so bad, at least tell me so that we could plan your heist properly!"

Ves crossed his arms. "I already asked you to get me a relic, but you rejected my request, remember? Since you weren't any help back then, I decided that I needed to take matters into my own hands."

"You reckless dimwit! I thought you only wanted to obtain a curiosity to understand Ylvainan culture better! I had no idea you were this desperate to obtain a treasured relic to the point of riling up the entire Ylvainan Protectorate to get what you want! If I knew you were this serious, I would have backed you up all the way!"

Neither of the two understood each other's intentions. Both Ves and Calabast realized that their miscommunication led to a far more dangerous outcome than if they cooperated!

On his end, Ves didn't communicate the desire to obtain a relic clearly enough. In his perspective, a relic connected to a great figure in the Ylvainan Faith possessed real, practical value that he could definitely make use of in order to enrich his upcoming mech design!

To Calabast, his request seemed very outlandish and frivolous. The spy didn't fully understand the specialty and capabilities of her partner. Her ignorance led her to believe that Ves wouldn't gain anything from a relic. Since the price of fulfilling his request was far too grave, she outright rejected it without understanding what it meant!

"What's done is done. Blame me all you want, but now that we've come this far, it's best to look ahead." Ves sighed.

He grew uncomfortable as Calabast continued to stare at him like he was a kid who did something naughty. Even if he acted recklessly, it was her fault for failing to hear him out in the first place!

"You're right, but that doesn't mean I'll forget about your stunt!" She gritted her teeth. "It could have been much worse for the both of us if I hadn't acted as soon as I heard what happened at the grand cathedral. Do you think we would be free to meet with each other if I hadn't covered your tracks?"

"What do you mean?"

Calabast threw up her hands in an exasperated fashion. "You're lucky I'm smart enough to figure out who's responsible as soon as I first received the news! I worked quickly to publish a statement on the galactic net that the True Believers have claimed responsibility for the theft. Not only that, but I've also hacked the security systems of the grand cathedral and wiped out as many logs and recordings as possible. While I haven't managed to erase everything, I've at least made it harder for the authorities to figure out what happened."

Despite her disapproval, Calabast nonetheless backed him up when she figured out the truth. Ves appreciated her help. It seemed that she was very sincere about their partnership.

Deflecting the blame to the New Ylvaine Dynasty was a particular masterstroke. Ves hadn't thought about using them as a scapegoat. They were currently the biggest bogeymen on Kesseling VIII!

By throwing out their name, the Ylvainan authorities instantly adopted the assumption that the living prophet and his lackeys truly took action at the grand cathedral!

Most of the assets allocated to the investigation should be spent on rooting out the True Believers, thereby diverting a lot of attention from Ves. The fact that only a single Protector captain interrogated him in a perfunctory manner showed that they had little reason to suspect that he was involved.

Ves would have been in a much more troubling position if Calabast hadn't taken quick action!

"Do you think your countermeasures worked?" He cautiously asked.

"There is still a chance that some of the more suspicious and skeptical Ylvainans are prejudiced towards us." Calabast grimly replied. "So don't put down your guard. Act like you are constantly being monitored. Even if you activate a signal jammer, don't make use of it too often, or you'll definitely attract suspicion. I'm sure our private conversation has attracted a lot of questions right now from the people who are assigned to monitor our movements."

That was bad news to Ves, but at least the Ylvainan minders shouldn't look at him too closely or care too much about what he was doing.

"Will the high inquisitor pay another visit?"

Calabast shrugged. "Probably. Once the Ylvainans failed to track down their missing relic, they'll cast a wide net. As persons of interests, both of us will receive a lot of scrutiny. Before they rule us out as suspects, we shouldn't do anything that arouses their suspicion. The biggest problem right now is that I'm not sure whether they truly bought the story that the True Believers are behind the theft."

"Oh? Didn't you say that this cover story worked?"

"It's undoubtedly effective to the public and the vast majority of the Ylvainan authorities. The average Ylvainan isn't exactly good at critical thinking, so they have no cause to doubt that the True Believers are responsible. That doesn't mean that the higher-ups are equally as ignorant, especially those who are aligned with the traditionalists. You know what I mean, right?"

Ves tentatively nodded. If the attack on the Grand Church of the Grey Martyr was a conspiracy of their own making, then this incident might lead them to believe that someone was giving them a taste of their own medicine!

Throughout all of this, the actual New Ylvaine Dynasty were unjustly maligned! They must be puking blood when they heard that unknown people ascribed terrible events to their organization!

Why would the True Believers risk turning public opinion against their cult by slaughtering so many innocent Ylvainans?

Why did the living prophet want to steal a discarded nutrient pack wrapper that used to belong to his first incarnation so badly? Such a historical relic was immensely valuable to every Ylvainan except for the purported reincarnation of Prophet Ylvaine!

The average Ylvainan citizen wouldn't think about these gaps in logic. However, it was a very different case when it came to astute officials such as High Inquisitor Xefin Lin Poxco!

"So what will we do now?"

"We lay low for now. The ball is in the court of the Protectors of the Faith and the Attendants of Ylvaine. Due to the seriousness of the theft of a relic associated with the great prophet, the Shepherds of the Flock don't have any sway anymore in the Kesseling System!"

That basically meant that the Curin Dynasty were currently impotent against the indignation of the Kronons and Poxcos! Whatever the latter two wanted, the Curins had no choice but to comply, because all of them desperate sought to recover the stolen relic and track down the culprits responsible for this blasphemous crime!

Calabast shared her thoughts on what might ensue from this event.

"First, the entire Kesseling System will be locked down for the foreseeable time. Martial law will last as long as the relic remains missing or there is no hope of retrieving it anymore."

"Won't the locals object to the measure if it goes on for months?" Ves frowned.

"Don't underestimate the perseverance of the Ylvainans. While the locals will suffer, the Curins won't let them starve. They're forced to spend an enormous sum of money to keep the Kesseling System from collapsing during this period. Another factor that plays a role that the vast majority of Ylvainans want to recover the missing relic as much as the traditionalists. The locals will endure any hardship as long as it helps the investigation!"

That meant that Ves could not do anything that stood out for the next few months!

"What else will happen?"

"The Protectors of the Faith and the Attendants of Ylvaine have already diverted a lot of forces to the Kesseling System." She said. "Some of the best investigators and forensic specialists of the Protectorate are on their way right now! While I'm confident that I've wiped out most of our tracks, we can't rule out anything!"

"With so many troops pouring into the Kesseling System, the situation will become very volatile." Ves judged. "But aside from suppressing the Curins, they won't do anything drastic, right?"

"I'm not sure about that." Calabast shook her head. "I've obtained evidence that the New Ylvaine Dynasty might be heading to the Kesseling System as well!"

"What?!"

"Do you think the True Believers will continue to let others use them as scapegoats? The living prophet is undoubtedly pissed that he and his cult are being unjustly maligned. They'll probably sneak their way into the Kesseling System and perform their own investigations."

Ves started to sweat. He understood now why Calabast was inordinately pissed at him. All of the forces converging on Kesseling VIII was too much for her and the Curins to cope!

If the True Believers managed to smuggle in a considerable amount of mechs to the planet, then a dangerous confrontation might ensue! Ves and Calabast might get pulled into this vortex in the process, which neither of them wanted!

He groaned. "Is that everything, or is there anything else that I need to be concerned about?"

"Unfortunately, that's not the end of it." Calabast shook her head. "Do you remember the Star Faith Collective? They're probably gloating at the misfortunes afflicting the Ylvaine Protectorate. It suits the Star Worshipers if

their rival state is mired in factional warfare. You can bet they're attempting to sneak as many operatives as possible into the Kesseling System. These operatives will definitely take action to stir the pot and aggravate the internal division between the leading dynasties!"

Ves understood what she was talking about. It sounded exactly like something Flashlight would do against the Vesians. Shifty bastards like Leland and Calabast would probably be salivating if something as chaotic like this took place in an enemy state!

These foreign elements posed the greatest threat to Ves and Calabast. Unlike the other Ylvainan factions, the Star Worshippers possessed no incentive to restrain themselves and minimize their impact on the locals.

In fact, they would do everything they can to rile everybody up and inflict more damage!

Calabast looked tired all of a sudden. "I hope you realize what kind of storm you caused with your impulsive actions. What I want to know now is whether it is all worth it. Why are relics so important to you, Ves? Don't obfuscate me with nonsense. Since you're so desperate to obtain them, they must bring a concrete benefit to you. What's your secret?"

The question hit very close to Ves. With her deductive ability, Calabast definitely surmised that Ves was hiding something! She was too astute!

He decided to throw her bone. "You're right. I can definitely make use of a relic. The more important the relic, the more benefits I can derive from them. It's difficult to explain why they're useful to me. It's related to my design philosophy."

"What is your design philosophy?"

"Metaphysical Man-Machine Symbiosis."

Calabast blinked. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"If you don't even understand that much, there's no point explaining my design philosophy to you." Ves self-righteously stated.

Calabast sent a piercing glare at him. "Don't try to avoid my question. Your rhetorical tricks won't work on me. Tell it to me straight. What are you planning to do with the relic you stole?"

Ves really didn't want to answer this question, but it seemed that Calabast wouldn't let him go if he continued to deflect the matter! Instances like this was why he hated spies! They were too astute to fall for his usual tricks!

#### Chapter 1202 Six Virtues

In the end, Calabast deactivated her privacy screen and her signal jammer and stormed out of the guest compound. Ves waved her goodbye with a brittle smile.

When Calabast insisted on an explanation on what Ves was planning to do with a relic, he explained as vaguely as possible.

As a mech designer, he could be as clear or as opaque with his explanations as possible! It was no trouble for him at all to resort to the most incomprehensible jargon imaginable to throw Calabast in confusion!

As smart as she appeared to be, Ves was pretty sure that she wasn't a mech designer!

However, Calabast wouldn't let him go without at least some satisfaction, so Ves gave her a small hint.

"Everything I've done is for the benefit of my upcoming mech design. There is much more to mechs than meets the eye. I'm sure you've heard about the remarkable nature of my Aurora Titan design. My next design will definitely result in a similar impact, if not greater! By then you'll see that all of this trouble was worth it in the end!"



Since the deed was already done, Calabast had little choice but to let Ves go through with his plan. It helped that she had already heard about the Aurora Titan and its remarkable nature.

Thinking about what many observers said about the mech gave Calabast some clues what Ves was trying to accomplish.

The notion was enough to arouse her curiosity.

Whatever Calabast thought about his work, Ves was glad he finally got the woman off his back.

"I only want to design a mech. Why am I constantly getting pulled into trouble?" He lamented.

Calabast's visit aroused the attention of the Protectors of the Faith assigned to guard the guest compound. While neither of them aroused any suspicion so far, it was unusual for Madame Cecily to take the step to visit Ves instead of the other way around.

Nonetheless, considering their business relationship, it was not entirely unthinkable for Madame Cecily to move with haste. Kesseling VIII entered a very dangerous period right now. Ves needed to be brought up to speed lest he did something that attracted everyone's attention.

The Protectors of the Faith quickly turned their attention back to their guard duties. After the local authorities declared martial law, nobody was on the streets, but that didn't mean they could rule out an attack.

Ves didn't have anything to do for the foreseeable time. He already fleshed out the ranged aspect of his hero mech. He only had to wait for Ketis to finish her own proposal.

At this time, Lucky should have found a deep hole to hide in, so he couldn't process the relic either.

He did find out something he could do in the meantime.

He could make a start with constructing his images.

Truthfully, Ves didn't want to do so yet without coming in touch with the relic and determining its spiritual qualities. It would be bad if his images were incompatible with the spiritual fragment he expected to refine from his spoils.

Since he didn't have anything else to do, he changed and figured it wouldn't hurt to make some strides.

He took stock and determined whether he should still stick to the Triple Division technique to enrich the X-Factor of his hero mech.

The original intention for the Triple Division technique was to introduce more dimensions to the X-Factor of his designs. Ves took advantage of the ease in which he could superimpose multiple images together and create an amalgamation that inherited all of their traits.

In almost all cases, increasing the complexity and adding more flavors to the X-Factor was very beneficial to his mech designs. Average mech pilots would be able to bond closer to their mechs and allow the X-Factor to influence their decisions in a way that subtly increased their performance.

Yet was it in his interest to apply the same solution in this special case?

"Not exactly. Rather than aim for a mix of flavors, it's better for me to stick to a single flavor instead and make it as strong as possible!"

Each mech design had to fit the circumstances and the target audience.

First, he considered his overarching goal. He was not designing a mech for the market. Only six copies would exist at most. While Ves still wanted to accommodate the needs of the elite Kronon mech pilots, the true purpose of his hero mech design was to impress the public!

For this reason, Ves needed to pay more attention to how his mech would be perceived by the public. The look and feel of the mech had to be as majestic and attention-grabbing as possible!

The X-Factor of his mech needed to be both strong and coherent. The purer the X-Factor, the stronger the aura.

If Ves stuck to using a single image as opposed to employing the Triple Division technique, he would be able to improve the performance of his mech pilots at the cost of lessening its impact on the public.

Ordinarily, it was always worthwhile for him to make this tradeoff because his mechs were already sufficiently impressive. Catering to the public did not earn him as much money as encouraging mech buyers to purchase his mechs!

Therefore, Ves decided to forgo using multiple images in order to maximize the strength and purity of the X-Factor of his hero mech.

There was a time and place for the Triple Division technique, but for this special commission he already made up his mind.

Now that he thought about it, the Triple Division technique initially served as a way for him to strengthen his mech design in the absence of other solutions.

He had come a long way since then. Not only had his Spirituality grown stronger since his Apprentice days, but he developed a complete spiritual toolbox! All of these developments opened up a lot more possibilities for him to tailor the X-Factor of his design to his tastes!

As Ves thought about the nature of his current design project, another question popped up. "Should I make all six copies uniform or should I make them a little distinct?"

This was an important question. The commission didn't specify this issue, giving Ves free rein to decide.

"It's easier to produce an identical set."

Ves was short on time so he couldn't spend too much time on individualizing all six mechs. If Ves merely stuck to a single design and produced six completely identical copies, then he'd be able to fulfill the commission faster.

While Ves was slightly attracted to this convenience, he didn't feel much for it. An unknown urge in his mind wanted him to tackle this project in a more distinctive fashion.

Rather than producing six completely identical copies of the same hero mech design, why not add some individual flairs to each of them? Designing such a distinctive set of mechs strongly appealed to his artistic sensibilities.

He never embarked on such a project before. While Ves didn't have the time to add a lot of individual touches to the exterior appearance of his mechs, it was enough to add some little variations.

What Ves truly cared about was whether he could customize the X-Factor of an individual copy.

His usual method was to apply the images he constructed to a single mech design. Each copy produced from one of his designs inherited this X-Factor without any significant deviations.

Normally, Ves aimed to minimize deviations as much as possible. Now, he wanted to accomplish the opposite. How could he customize the X-Factor of each individual copy of a common design?

A solution came to mind. For the shared design, he could implement a single, focused image based off the spiritual fragment he refined off Prophet Ylvaine's holy relic.

This pure image would serve as the design spirit of his finished hero mech design. Only when Ves had reached the stage of fabricating individual copies would he intervene once again.

He planned to make the unprecedented move of manipulating the individual X-Factor of a copy by superimposing it with an individual image!

Each of these images introduced a strong bias towards a distinct aspect of Prophet Ylvaine's spiritual fragment!

Considering the importance of faith to the Ylvainans, Ves decided to construct images based on six abstract values that complimented the individual mechs!

Ves wracked his mind and quickly grabbed the first six virtues he could think of that were aggressive enough to be paired with a mech.

"Courage. Justice. Perseverance. Zeal. Sacrifice. Devotion."

Although he randomly selected these words, saying them put Ves into a solemn mood. He vaguely suspected that if he truly managed to distinguish his mechs with these virtues, he'd be able to produce something incredibly amazing!

"This design project is growing more and more significant." He whispered to himself. "If I don't restrain myself, I might end up biting off more than I can chew!"

The scope of his design project kept growing more and more out of control. While the choices he made would definitely improve the end product, he couldn't afford to lose sight of his overarching goals.

"Enough is enough. There is no benefit to adding another distinctive aspect to my design."

He decided his design incorporated enough innovations. There was no need for him to jazz up his mech design any further.

As Ves locked in his decisions, he let out a deep breath. "I should check up on Ketis. I can't wait all day for her to finish her work."

He visited her room.

"Ah, Ves, I'm almost finished!"

"You don't have to complete your draft." Ves casually waved. "Just introduce me to your design choices."

Ves studied her sketches as she narrated her design choices. Overall, she put a significantly different spin on the melee aspect of his hero mech.

"This mech is supposed to be an offensive mech, right? I was thinking that it doesn't have to be flexible and agile as swordsman mechs. It's much better if it can rely on its superior strength and force to overpower its opponents. I chose to strengthen the limbs and structure of the design at the cost of sacrificing some of its flexibility. While the design is a lot clunkier than your initial draft, as long as the mech pilot possesses a lot of foresight, they'll be able to cope with it by planning his moves ahead."

"So you've fully converted the hero mech into a momentum-based mech." Ves observed with a critical eye.

Although her lack of skill and design experienced resulted in a rough and unrefined draft, he nonetheless perceived its aggressive charm.

"What kind of sword did you choose to pair with the design?"

"I went with a thick saber."

Ves raised his eyebrows at the choice. "A curved-edged weapon? Wouldn't that make it harder for my mech to penetrate armor?"

"Mechs rarely resort to using the tip of their swords to pierce through armor." Ketis shook her head. "Sabers are far more suitable to momentum-based

mech combat. Combining momentum with the slashing attacks of a saber can inflict major damage to enemy mechs with ease."

Pairing the hero mech with a saber instead of a straight-bladed sword narrowed down its fighting style, which Ves didn't necessarily oppose. It certainly made his hero mech look more distinct.

All the other design choices that Ketis had made served to strengthen the hero mech's ability to slash and leverage its momentum to its advantage.

Overall, Ves kind of liked it. "It's an inspiring choice. While hero mechs are often associated with straight-bladed weapons, it's not unheard of to pair them with sabers."

Considering the theme of the hero mech, Ves even contemplated whether he should opt for a blunt weapon instead. Many religions seem to have a thing for maces and hammers.

However, Ketis wouldn't be able to contribute to the design project if that was the case. Ves truly intended for her to become involved this time, and that meant that he needed to make some compromises for her sake.

#### **Chapter 1203 Accommodating the Client**

Several tense and suspenseful days passed by since the Grand Cathedral of Ylvaine's Mercy lost its holy relic.

Some people from the Bright Republic and other foreign states heard what transpired. They laughed at how the Ylvainans grew distressed about the theft of a mere nutrient pack wrapper!

To them, the nutrient pack wrapper was just a piece of trash. The only reason it was valuable was because Prophet Ylvaine once tore it open and ate its contents. Aside from that, it was just an empty, mass-produced container!

Only the Ylvainans took the loss of the nutrient pack wrapper seriously. Regardless of its unimpressive appearance, anything that had been touched by Prophet Ylvaine was sacred in their eyes!

The authorities intensified their search for the missing relic. Even as Kesseling VIII went under lockdown, the capital city of Krent became host to numerous mech and auxiliary regiments!

There was hardly any street in Krent that was devoid of an armed presence! The extreme measures taken by the Protectors of the Faith suppressed the entire city, turning it into a lifeless and empty ghost city where all of its residents huddled in their homes.

Not a single civilian exited their homes! If anyone was short on food or medicine, the Curins sent out a bot that carried the needed supplies to their homes. No one was allowed to go out unless they received permission!

Even so, none of the Ylvainans objected to the draconian measures. In fact, many of them wholeheartedly supported the authorities in retrieving what they considered to be their most important cultural heritage!

Ves spent his time tweaking his draft design with Ketis while constructing an image of his hero mech.

Considering that he planned to make use of a spiritual fragment that possessed an undeniable relation to Prophet Ylvaine, he adopted the same great figure as the principal image for his mech.

It was easy to obtain information about the prophet. The Ylvainans were more than willing to pass on an entire library's worth of reading materials related to the man.

The only issue was that most of the biographies and other books about the prophet had been authored by the Attendants of Ylvaine. What they wrote



about the prophet conformed to their own agenda, and uncomfortable facts often took a backseat.

As a Brighter, Ves developed his own understanding of the prophet before he visited the Ylvaine Protectorate. The Bright Republic always painted Ylvaine as a charlatan and a fraud.

The only reason why he was able to build up a massive following was because he was very charismatic and persuasive when needed. He possessed a strong talent in coming off as sincere whenever he preached to an audience!

In his private life, the prophet wasn't shy about enjoying his life. Not only did he start a harem of more than a hundred wives, he also spent huge amounts of money on luxuries. He wanted to enjoy the most exclusive foods, the priciest jewelry, the biggest starships and so on.

The prophet preached many virtues, but humility and moderation weren't among them. Although the Attendants of Ylvaine scrubbed this aspect about the prophet from their biographies, there was undeniable proof that Ylvaine openly lived a very extravagant life!

Ves favored this interpretation of Prophet Ylvaine over the more flattering portrayal that the revisionists had doctored.

Yet when it came to constructing his image, he realized it would be completely inappropriate to confront the Ylvainans with such a negative opinion of their holy founder.

"My mech is designed to impress the Ylvainans and prove that foreigners are just as good in designing Ylvainan mechs as domestic mech designers."

He would definitely fail in these goals if he wanted to impose his own interpretation of Prophet Ylvaine to the local masses.

"It's not my job to force the Ylvainans to doubt their beliefs." Ves shook his head. "As much as it goes against my Brighter sensibilities, I should do my best to present something that affirms their faith!"

It was very hard for a non-believer like him to design a mech that supported a faith he didn't believe in! How could he possibly work on designing something that he didn't fully agree with? It would be as if he was working with a gun pointed at his head!

Ves began to think of a way to resolve this contradiction.

"Maybe I should don a mask."

If he constructed an image of himself as a devout Ylvainan believer, he could hypnotize himself into designing his mech like a faithful Ylvainan. This solution strongly tempted him because it was the most convenient solution to this problem.

"However, will I want to design a mech while I'm not myself?"

His pride as a mech designer rejected this option. While mech designers needed to be adaptable to an extent, they also needed to stick to their core principles!

If Ves resorted to donning a mask each time he wanted to design an eccentric mech, then he was basically relying on crutches to get what he wanted.

It was better for him to avoid this bad habit and learn how to cope with this problem with his true self.

"I can't lie to myself. I can't fool my design philosophy."

He began to approach the problem from a different perspective. He took a step back and considered the situation as a contract between a mech designer and a client.

"As long as the mech designer accepted the demands of a client, they have the duty to fulfill them to the best of their ability."

Even if Ves didn't believe in the Ylvainan Faith, he should respect the wishes of his client.

In this case, that meant that Ves had to design his mech in accordance to the mainstream interpretation of the Ylvainan Faith.

"I'll have to pretend that Prophet Ylvaine is the real deal and not as self-indulgent as I think."

Could he design his mech with such a contradictory belief in mind?

"Maybe I can. Who knows what the real truth looks like."

Even without donning a mask, it wasn't hard to adopt a different mindset about the prophet. While he wouldn't be able to bring himself to believing in the Ylvainan Faith, to design his mech with the assumption that the prophet was sincere shouldn't be too difficult.

It was a compromise position that didn't satisfy him very much. It was a rather awkward way of resolving this difficult dilemma.

"That's okay. I never intended to design a mech that completely imitates the Ylvainan style."

He wanted to put his own spin on Ylvainan-style mechs. It wasn't all that bad to retain some of his Brighter sensibilities. The spiritual fragment he intended to refine should make up for his lack of piety to the Ylvainan Faith.

To that end, Ves continued to build up a strong but not too detailed image of Prophet Ylvaine. Although he could have added a lot of depth to the image, he didn't want to make it too complex and incorporate too many lies and contradictory aspects.

"It's best for me to stick to the broad strokes of his life and emphasize the virtues ascribed to the prophet."

Ves basically constructed an image of the prophet as a human myth. The depiction he painted in his mental canvas slowly turned into a pure and holy figure.

He hadn't added a lot of color to the image, but that was okay. Once he completed the design and fabricated the individualized copies, he intended to introduce images based around the six virtues to the X-Factor to his mechs.

"Each mech will bear a different color. None of them will be the same."

This was also an unintentional but very welcome form of copy protection of his hero mech.

Even if someone managed to obtain the full design schematics of his hero mech, the best they could do was to reproduce a pale copy that didn't possess the definition of his unique and authentic copies.

The six mechs based on six different virtues would forever be unique and irreplaceable!

No matter how much the Ylvainans begged for another copy, Ves wouldn't accept the request!

"Hero mechs are meant to be limited in the first place. I won't dilute the worth of my design by producing it en masse!"

According to the contracts he signed when he accepted the commission, Ves retained ownership of the mech design once he finished it. The commission only called him to deliver six mechs that met Madame Cecily's demands.

Naturally, without Madame Cecily's permission, Ves wasn't allowed to fabricate any copies. Only when they both agreed would more authentic copies be made.

This point was moot because Ves would never agree to do so. Keeping the amount of copies limited conformed to his stance on hero mechs.

Sometime later in the day, Ves perceived a disruptive field around him. He instantly paused his research on Prophet Ylvaine and smiled.

"Lucky! You're back!"

His cat phased through the wall and gently floated into his lap. His teeth latched on to a bag which contained a very significant object.

Ves immediately activated his Privacy Shield.

"Are you okay?"

"Meow!"

"Did you succeed?"

"Meow!"

He was worried that something awful might have happened to Lucky, but even the best security measures of the grand cathedral never posed a challenge. His cat had practically turned into a master thief once Ves provided the Miniaturized Stealth Generator to him! This object completely blinded the Ylvainan security guards and security systems from beginning to end!

Ves took hold of the bag from a tired-looking Lucky and opened it up. With shaking hands, he retrieved a nutrient pack wrapper.

It looked just like new. Nutrient pack wrappers were made of cheap, composite materials that ordinarily decomposed after someone opened them. The Ylvainans prevented this from happening by treating it with a special compound that kept it fresh!

Touching the wrapper with his naked fingers was a sublime experience to him. Even before he opened the bag, he already sensed the wrapper's spiritual accumulation.

It was strong! Seeing it in his spiritual vision practically blinded him! The nutrient pack wrapper accumulated so much faith that even an expert pilot would take it seriously if they could sense its quantity!

"Not only that, but it's also not as muddy as the spiritual accumulation of the other relics!"

The Ylvainans were much more devout and of one mind when faced with this holy relic. Hardly any Ylvainan would become distracted when faced with something that had been touched by Prophet Ylvaine himself!

Therefore, not only was the spiritual accumulation unimaginably strong, but it was also relatively purer!

The higher the purity, the less waste that resulted from the refining process!

Ves tried to estimate the overall strength of the spiritual fragment that might result. It would definitely be something that was comparable to an expert pilot in quality, but it would fall short of matching that of an ace pilot.

"Ace pilots are incredibly rare. It's not so easy for expert pilots to advance to that height." He sighed.

The nutrient pack wrapper was just a disposable object to Prophet Ylvaine. It didn't carry much original sentiment in the first place.

"Speaking of that, this is the first time I've come in touch with an actual remnant of the prophet!"

He grew curious about the prophet's original sentiment. Touching a remnant of someone's spirituality was like coming into touch with the essence of that individual.

As far as he knew, spiritual fragments didn't lie about the true nature of their owners. Even if they wanted to deceive his senses, it was very hard to do so unless they were as strong as Qilanxo.

"Besides, the original sentiment belongs to someone who's been dead for centuries. After so much time, it must have lost a lot of liveliness. It should hardly be able to summon up the energy to resist my inspections."

Ves believed he would be able to find out the truth behind mythical figure with this probe. Was the prophet a charlatan or a believer?

### Chapter 1204 Messenger

The first half of the Age of Conquest was a glorious time for the human race.

The second half of the Age of Conquest was a time of despair for humanity.

Unrestricted warfare between different human states, polities and trans-galactic enterprises led to the slaughter of trillions of people. Entire planets got blown up for the most whimsical reasons, and power-hungry admirals terrorized entire star sectors with their invincible warfleets.

Every age encapsulated the best and worst sides of humanity.

The Age of Stars exemplified humanity's insatiable curiosity for the stars. Yet they also found out the hard way that curiosity killed the cat.

The Age of Conquest showcased humanity's cunning and ingenuity. Yet they grew so quickly that they began to run wild with power.

Prophet Ylvaine grew up in a time of uncertainty and degeneration.

Higher-ups blatantly subjected their bodies to genetic modification that inserted 'superior' alien genes in their genetic makeup. While these leaders and powerful people largely got what they asked, they neglected the side effects affecting their psyche!

Human commoners throughout the galaxy lost faith in their leaders. Everyone who promoted upwards to a certain extent could not help but join the trend of incorporating the latest and most cutting-edge gene mod templates that they could afford!

Ambitious individuals who rejected this trend would never be able to keep up with their superior colleagues!

This led to a wide scale pattern where the most cautious and sober people stagnated in their careers. Their superiors didn't appreciate cowardly baseline humans who performed poorly.

Instead, those who willingly augmented their bodies with gene mod templates always climbed higher.

Over time, this disparity led to a self-reinforcing pattern where reckless leaders promoted reckless subordinates.

It was no wonder that the lower classes lost faith in the wisdom and judgement of the higher classes.

Prophet Ylvaine grew up during a time where the differences were incredibly stark.

In this time of fear and uncertainty, he rose up one day in the galactic heartland by presenting a vision of hope.

While the Ylvainan Faith he spurred on possessed some wild beliefs, the overall thread of his predictions warmed the hearts of many believers.

Prophet Ylvained claimed that no matter how dark the times had gotten, there was always light at the end of the tunnel.

His message rejected the differences between humans and aliens and humans and humans. The fighting for territory, resources and power in the material realm was as meaningless as two kids fighting over a toy.



One day, he claimed, all life in the galaxy would transcend into a higher existence. The wants and needs that everyone held back then were ultimately meaningless.

Yet the prophet didn't practice what he preached. Rather than set an example by living in moderation, he indulged in many fancies and excesses.

This contradictory behavior led many secularists to believe that the prophet was a swindler who managed to sucker billions of people into opening up their wallets to his cult.

Ultimately, no one really knew what Ylvaine really thought. The sources describing him were all biased.

Perhaps Ves was the first person to come in touch with the true Ylvaine.

As Ves projected his Spirituality and touched the original sentiment that Prophet Ylvaine left behind on the nutrient pack wrapper, he became swept by an inordinately strong emotion.

Absolute faith!

The original sentiment attached to the holy relic didn't carry the full range of Prophet Ylvaine's personality. Instead, it only encompassed the strongest and most defined aspects of his spirit.

What immediately became clear to Ves that the prophet strongly believed in his own message!

He was a man on a holy mission to propagate the revelations he received!

Every sentient being in the galaxy must know what is to come!

"There is no doubt in Prophet Ylvaine's mind!" Ves gasped.

At the very least, his doubts were far too weak to be passed on to the original sentiment he left behind on the nutrient pack wrapper.

There were other facets to the original sentiments. As Ves slowly worked his way around the prophet's blindingly strong faith, he noted a touch of.. weakness.

"Maybe weakness is the wrong word. Mortality?"

The prophet claimed that everyone would transcend to godhood one day, but that time had not yet come. Ylvaine plainly admitted to himself and his worshippers that he was very much a fallible, mortal being who possessed the associated human wants and needs.

Ylvaine hated his mortal shackles. He hated his fragile human shell. He couldn't wait for the Time of Ascension to arrive so that he would be liberated from his body.

Until then, he wasn't shy about indulging in his mortal desires. He never claimed to be a personification of a god.

He was merely a man with a holy message, but still very much a man.

Ves didn't know what to make of the prophet's original sentiment. The prophet's absolute faith paired with a resigned acceptance of his weakness led to a complex individual who was lucky enough to cultivate a receptive audience.

The prophet's acceptance of his own flawed existence led to a distinct lack of desire to undergo genetic modification. Ves already became aware that the Ylvainans frowned upon the practice more than usual.

To the Ylvainans, their mortal shell and minds were inconsequential. It didn't matter how bad or good they were when everyone transcended into something greater one day.

There was another flavor interspersed with faith and weakness.

"Ambition."

The massive growth of his cult inflated the prophet's certainty that his revelations could change the face of the galaxy! In the dark times when he was alive, Ylvaine's message of hope and salvation converted many people to his faith!

While many religions offered hope and salvations to their believers, none were so daring as the Ylvainan Faith. The prophet's predictions were uniquely tailored to the current times and resonated much better to the people than older, more outdated faiths.

A blossoming ambition grew within the mind of the prophet. He wanted to accelerate the growth of his cult, reach more people and sweep over all of human space!

And that wasn't enough. Once he converted all of humanity to his faith, the prophet harbored the even wilder ambition of converting aliens to his beliefs as well!

The Ylvainan Faith didn't discriminate between humans and aliens! Rather than consider different races as adversaries, the prophet regarded them as brothers who shared a common origin!

Ylvaine's controversial belief completely upended humanity's prevailing attitude towards aliens!

Ves didn't find any doubt or duplicity of this belief in Ylvaine's original sentiment. The prophet truly believed that a time would come where humans and aliens settled their differences with each other.

"How does he come up with these prophecies?" Ves wondered.

The man behind the revelations didn't know why he received them in the first place.

Perhaps he received glimpses of the future. Perhaps some unfathomable existence gifted him with a blueprint of what was to come.

No matter what, the prophet considered himself a messenger.

This left Ves with an unanswered question. The prophet sincerely believed in the revelations he received, but didn't know where they originated.

Perhaps a small part of himself didn't want to know the answer.

Therefore, the question whether the prophet was a visionary or a charlatan remained in limbo. Ves couldn't determine from his inspection whether divine inspiration or psychosis was the source to Ylvaine's revelations.

It seemed that Ves wouldn't be able to crack the greatest mystery about the Ylvainan Faith today.

"At the very least, the prophet is sincere." He sighed with relief.

Ves wanted to design a mech that inspired sincere belief.

It would have been bad if the prophet turned out to be an unabashed swindler who cynically took advantage of his gullible worshippers. How could Ves make use of a spiritual fragment of such a detestable man?

Designing a mech that carried the aura of a scam artist and a profiteer would definitely incite the entire Protectorate against him! He'd be dead before he left the planet!

Therefore, Ves became relieved that the prophet's original sentiment possessed the sincerity he sought.

He could use this quality to make his upcoming mech design affirm with the beliefs of the Ylvainans!

As for whether this faith was built upon delusion or divine inspiration, Ves didn't dig any deeper. It wasn't necessary for him to look a gift horse in the mouth.

"Meow?"

"Yes, Lucky. You haven't stolen this nutrient pack wrapper in vain." Ves smiled and petted Lucky on his head. "You've done a very good job. I'll be sure to ship in your reward as soon as possible."

"Meow!"

After comforting Lucky, Ves turned his attention back to the holy relic with a heated stare. Its value didn't disappointed him at all!

Of course, its value also turned it into an extremely hot potato! Once someone found out that he possessed the most valuable holy relic on Kesseling VIII, he'd be dead in an instant!

"The entire planet, no, the entire Protectorate is hunting for this relic!"

Ves couldn't spend too much time exploring its original sentiment and surrounding spiritual accumulation. He needed to process it as fast as possible in order to minimize the risk of exposure!

"Let's start!"

He centered himself and focused his mind. He brought nearly all of his concentration to bear as he began to employ his new spiritual techniques.

The first step was to wipe out the spiritual imprints of an uncountable amount of Ylvainans who worshipped the nutrient pack wrapper.

The quantity of spiritual accumulation was daunting, but Ves didn't encounter any significant trouble. The spiritual accumulation looked strong on the outside, but was fragmented from within.

The only concern that Ves faced was that he needed to cover a lot of ground. The sheer quantity of spiritual imprints caused him to spend three hours to clean out every spiritual imprint that didn't belong to the prophet!

"What an exhausting chore!" Ves wiped some sweat off his brow.

He exerted himself as hard as possible to complete this task quickly, but he was forced to take a pause immediately afterwards.

After a short rest, began to take the next step.

All of the spiritual accumulation the holy relic acquired turned into ownerless spiritual energy. If Ves didn't do something about it, the spiritual energy would eventually begin to drift away.

This wasn't what he wanted, so he needed to take action quickly.

To encourage Ylvaine's spiritual imprint to take over the spiritual accumulation, Ves needed to feed it with thoughts and emotions that matched the original sentiment.

Ves already constructed an image of Prophet Ylvaine beforehand. While his depiction of the prophet differed a bit from what he perceived from the original sentiment, they still shared a lot in common.

Ves carefully donned the mask of Prophet Ylvaine.

An entirely different personality swept into his mind and body. Ves hadn't injected any of his spiritual energy in it yet, so the mask didn't overpower his true personality.

However, the strength and detail of this image surpassed any other mask he used before.

He momentarily fell into confusion and doubt before he managed to reconcile himself a bit.

The most important part now was to convince himself that he was an absolute believer of the Ylvainan Faith. Only strong conviction would allow him to gain recognition from the original sentiment!

He adjusted his mindset for at least ten minutes before he became assured that he could proceed.

As his strong but not entirely perfect beliefs swept over the original sentiment, its spiritual imprint became excited.

Despite the many discrepancies, Ves succeeded in fooling the spiritual imprint!

As the remnant of someone who died, the spiritual imprint had long lost its liveness and wisdom. It instinctively sought to feed off the fake thoughts and emotions that Ves provided it without determining if they were authentic!

A huge suction emerged where Ves felt as if the holy relic he was holding became a bottomless existence! The thoughts and emotions it absorbed exceeded his expectations!

"Damn it, it's sucking me dry!"

### **Chapter 1205 Spiritual Refining**

The original sentiment of the holy relic hungered to take over the spiritual accumulation surrounding it.

Now that Ves wiped out the latter's spiritual imprints, it became free for the taking, but only if the original sentiment possessed the fuel to sustain the conquest!

After donning the mask of Prophet Ylvaine, Ves continued to generate new thoughts and emotions that centered around the Ylvainan Faith. Although a genuine Ylvainan worshipper would spot the many flaws and shortcomings of his understanding of faith, the dormant original sentiment wasn't as discerning!

A moderate resemblance was enough for the original sentiment to strengthen and expand its spiritual imprint!

While Ves was happy that he succeeded with this step, he quickly regretted it as the drain exceeded his expectations!

He may not be giving away his spiritual energy, but he was giving up the resources that generated it! The loss was so huge that Ves forcibly ended the channeling before he turned into a human-shaped bot!

"Damnit! This relic is hungry!"

He immediately shed his mask and breathed deeply. The short contact heavily drained his mind! It might have dried up completely if the process continued for a dozen seconds!

After Ves regained some of his composure, he carefully inspected the results. The prophet's spiritual imprint encompassed around ten percent of the relic's spiritual accumulation. Right now, the spiritual imprint was in the process of filtering out the spiritual energy with incompatible attributes.

"Just ten percent?" He whined.

He was both happy and disappointed at this level of progress.

The fact that Ves accomplished so little meant that the resulting end product would certainly be formidable.

The downside was that Ves would have to spend days to complete the refining process. He felt so drained right now that the only way for him to recover quickly was to take a couple of hours of sleep.

Once he woke, he'll have to don his mask and divert a lot of thoughts and emotions to the hungry original sentiment again until he reached his limit.

After that, he would have to take another nap.



"I'll have to repeat this cycle over and over until all of the spiritual accumulation is claimed or rejected."

This would definitely take a while. Ves grew concerned that something awful might happen during this time.

The longer he held the relic, the greater the risk of exposure!

Fortunately, Ves wasn't the primary suspect of its theft. The Ylvainans should be focusing most of their attention elsewhere for the time being.

In order to decrease the chances of getting caught, he paused the process and made some arrangements.

He issued assignments to everyone to make it seem that they were all preoccupied. He also sent a message to Calabast informing her that he reached a stage in the design process where he was beginning to exert his specialty.

Someone as astute as her would be able to read between the lines that Ves was definitely doing something sensitive!

She sent a short reply in return.

"Understood."

No more needed to be said. Since she knew what was at stake, she would do her best to prevent or stall the authorities from disturbing Ves at the guest compound.

"A good ally is hard to come by." He sighed.

Although their partnership had gone off on a rocky start, Ves began to see the benefits of their mutual association.

As for Calabast, she must be regretting her decision as she was forced to clean up after the messes he left behind!

Ves chuckled a bit at the thought. Although it wasn't wise to provoke such a formidable individual, he couldn't help but enjoy seeing her miserable.

With all of these matters taken care of, Ves met with one more person before he resumed his refining.

"Melkor."

"Ves." His cousin greeted him. "What brings you here?"

"I want to check up on some matters. How are the Avatars doing?"

"The Avatars I've brought on this mission are uneasy." Melkor frowned. "They didn't expect Kesseling VIII to be a hotbed of trouble."

"Will it affect their performance?"

"No. They know their duty and they know that most of our security is being provided by the Protectors of the Faith. It's making us feel kind of useless."

Their life and death was in the hands of the Kronon Dynasty. While they trusted in the integrity of the Protectors of the Faith, who knew whether all of them agreed with protecting the foreigners.

The attack on the grand church already proved that traitors managed to infiltrate the ranks of the Protectors!

Fortunately, the Kronons should definitely be aware of this problem. They wouldn't allow a rogue Protector to turn their weapons against the foreigners.

It seemed that even when Ves finally ended his military service and gained control over his own life, he still had to entrust his safety to others. At this point in time, there was no way for the Avatars of Myth to meet all of his security needs.

Melkor shared the same frustrations. "It will take years before we can field three mech companies."

"I'm not blaming you for taking your time." Ves reassured him. "I'm sure the Avatars will become a force to be reckoned with in time, but that doesn't address our immediate concerns."

"Do you want to hire mercenaries?"

Ves shook his head. "No need. I think we can count on the Protectors of the Faith. Their integrity has always been the highest among the three leading dynasties. Besides, there's a large chance that any mercenaries we hire will turn out to be less reliable than the Protectorate's military."

They could only hire locals as the Protectorate barred most foreign mercenaries from entering the state. Hiring Ylvainan mercenaries did not sit well with either of them at this moment. Who knew if they were traditionalists who hated foreigners.

"So what is it that you want, Ves?"

"I'm thinking that the Avatars should hire some infantry to act as my guards. Seeing our guard detail in action back at the grand church made me realize that we can't keep depending on other forces to provide for our security. Whether it's Sanyal-Ablin or the Protectors of the Faith, they are all protecting me solely due to the fact that it's an assignment to them. They don't owe us their loyalty."

Melkor nodded in understanding. "I've been thinking about that as well, but no one in the Avatars has any experience with non-mech combat. We'll have to hire an infantry commander. The good news is that there's a lot of them. The bad news is that getting a good one will take a lot of effort."

Unlike mech pilots, humans didn't need to meet any strict requirements to become a trained footsoldier. While they didn't enjoy as much status as mech pilots, a lot of people still became guards or joined an auxiliary regiment.

Many mercenary corps fielded infantry as well in order to perform duties unsuited for mechs. Examples include clearing buildings, guarding indoor facilities and protecting VIPs.

"Do the best you can to hire someone we can trust when we get back to the Bright Republic."

Melkor raised his palm. "We don't have to wait that long, Ves. Although rare, there are some Larkinsons who served in an auxiliary regiment. Some of those old dogs are retired now, but I'm sure they're willing to get back into the saddle as long as we send a message."

The offer intrigued him. Ves rubbed his chin as he contemplated whether he should take advantage of this easy solution.

Though he was loathe to shift more power to the Larkinson Family, he was getting more and more frustrated at the lackluster growth of the Avatars of Myth.

While Ves wasn't willing to let one of the old dogs of the family become the Avatar Commander, it wasn't that big of a deal if he appointed one as an infantry captain.

Eventually, he nodded. "Do it. As long as whoever you bring onboard won't interfere with the other units, I'm fine with your choice."

"I'll get right on it, Ves. If everything goes smoothly, the Avatars should be able to field a fixed bodyguard rotation by the time we return to the Bright Republic."

Once he passed on his request, Ves returned back inside and closed himself off in his room. With Lucky on guard, he had few concerns that he'd get caught with the holy relic.

If someone wanted to barge into his room, Lucky could quickly take the holy relic and activate his Miniaturized Stealth Generator before phasing out of the room!

"I should get back on the job. The relic's spiritual accumulation won't refine by itself!"

Ves proceeded with encouraging the growth of the spiritual imprint. With an incredible amount of free spiritual energy nearby, the spiritual imprint continued to leap forward and engulf more territory.

While he felt very uneasy about wearing the mask of Prophet Ylvaine, he didn't need to maintain his unusual mental state for long. Each session only lasted five minutes or less before he cut off the connection and went back to sleep.

A few days passed by as Ves quietly immersed himself in sleep and donning Prophet Ylvaine's mask.

In his free time, he read up more on Prophet Ylvaine's life, though he slowly realized that it wasn't helpful to know more details.

"The X-Factor isn't meant to resurrect someone who's dead. It's meant to empower the mech and mech pilot!"

The hero mech he planned to design centered largely around unquestioning faith. The details didn't matter all that much. As long as the mech inspired strong belief in the Ylvainan Faith, it was okay if Ves left out some unwanted parts.

This was why he hadn't tweaked the image of Prophet Ylvaine in his mind any further. In its current state, it was already highly compatible with the remnant that the prophet had left behind on the relic.

The more Ves refined the spiritual accumulation, the more holy and inspiring it grew. At some point Ves even feared that some of its holy aura might penetrate past the walls and brush against the minds of the Ylvainans guarding the compound!

However, Ves could hardly go anywhere else to finish the job.

"Even if the Protectors of the Faith feel something unusual, they shouldn't suspect anything without hard evidence."

Ves still decided to hurry up. He ran himself ragged as he drained more and more of himself during each cycle. He wanted to squeeze as much thought and emotion out of him as possible in order to decrease the amount of cycles it took to refine the relic.

After three long days, Ves finally managed to complete the conversion process!

Ves felt as if the air was charged with spiritual energy. The nutrient pack wrapper had outputted a lot of unwanted spiritual energy these last few days because they possessed the wrong attributes.

However, the original sentiment claimed around half of what remained. A very strong and holy aura encompassed the nutrient pack wrapper. It was truly holy now, and Prophet Ylvaine's residual spirituality had grown to a formidable extent!

If not for the rejected spiritual energy dampening the aura of the holy relic, the Protectors of the Faith would have forced their way into his room already!

"This won't last forever, though. The loose spiritual energy is slowly dissipating!"

Ves needed to move quickly before he lost this protective cover. Now that the original sentiment and spiritual accumulation had merged, he wanted to compress it into a spiritual fragment and coax it into his mind.

He donned the mask of Prophet Ylvaine one more time and began to project his Spirituality around the relic's spiritual energy. He loosely touched it, arousing an intimate response, and began to apply force.

"Compress!"

Surprisingly, the cloud of spiritual energy didn't actively resist his measures. As far as it was concerned, Ves was Prophet Ylvaine, and his will had to be obeyed without question!

#### Chapter 1206 There Was Ligh

Ves expected a fight. Instead, he was met with cooperation. The holy relic's refined spirituality continued to believe in his disguise.

"It's like interacting with an algorithm. It doesn't have the wisdom and smarts to recognize it's being toyed with." He muttered.

One thing was for sure. Prophet Ylvaine was dead. The residue he left behind had already had already lost support.

Even if the New Ylvaine Dynasty 'resurrected' the prophet by cloning him in the form of an embryo, their new prophet was fundamentally a different person.

On a spiritual level, nothing tied the original prophet to the test tube prophets that the True Believers brought into existence.

"It's too bad none of them will believe me. Their faith has blinded them to the truth." Ves shook his head.

He didn't know if the prophet transcended to a higher existence or reincarnated into a different life. His theories on spirituality didn't offer any answers in that regard.

Right now, he was preoccupied with slowly compressing the loose cloud of spiritual energy in the holy relic into a solid, self-contained form.

While the spiritual imprint mistakenly recognized him as the source of its existence, the sheer quantity of spiritual energy made it very tough to work with! The more he compressed the cloud of spiritual energy, the more force he needed to exert!

Ves grew concerned that his strength wasn't enough to finish the process. What if the resistance exceeded the amount of force he exerted?

"Will I be forced to discard some of the spiritual energy?"

That would weaken the resulting spiritual fragment and waste a lot of valuable spiritual energy. Ves did not want to see some of his hard work go to waste!

Unfortunately, what he feared the most came to pass! At some point, his strength wasn't enough to compress the cloud into a concentrated form!

Although the cloud grew smaller and denser, it was still short of becoming a self-contained fragment that Ves could transfer into his mind without fearing that it might spill into his psyche and contaminate his thoughts!

"I'm stuck at the final step!" Ves cried.

He felt awful that a setback occurred just as he was about to create the end product. He put so much effort into refining the spiritual accumulation to amplify the influence that Prophet Ylvaine left behind. He didn't want to discard any of it in order to obtain a spiritual fragment!

"What should I do?"



Whenever Ves tried something new, he always braved the unknown. Failure could occur at any time.

While Ves was normally fine with encountering a setback every now and then, the situation was growing increasingly urgent! If he couldn't solve this problem quickly, he might get caught red-handed with the missing holy relic!

As Ves wracked his mind for a bit, a clever idea suddenly popped in his mind.

"The spiritual energy I'm perceiving behaves a lot like a gas. Maybe I can approach the problem from an engineering perspective!"

The field of pneumatics employed methods to convert air pressure to mechanical power and vica versa. If he combined it with the concept of mechanical leverage, he could sidestep the problem of insufficient force by taking advantage of a more sophisticated construction.

However, a problem quickly popped up. The only way for him to interact with the cloud of spiritual energy was by employing his own loose cloud of spiritual energy. The two were largely the same aside from their different spiritual imprints.

"The main problem is that loose spiritual energy can't be fixed into a solid form."

Another issue was that loose spiritual energy didn't exactly behave like a gas. For example, if Ves only took a small amount of spiritual energy, he was able to compress it into a solid fragment without a problem. Spiritual energy possessed a lot of other unusual properties that affected its handling.

He needed to find a different way to compress the spiritual energy. The solution needed to be based on his understanding of spirituality instead of physics.

One of the defining properties of spiritual energy was that it was alive. Before Ves refined the spiritual accumulation locked within the nutrient pack wrapper, the original sentiment had been listless and dormant.

Now that he treated it extensively, what remained had regained a lot of its vitality!

"Maybe.. I should just ask?"

When Ves carefully communicated his intention to the cloud of spiritual energy, it accepted his command!

The cloud was compressing by itself without any intervention from Ves!

"It actually worked!"

He spoke too soon. Just like Ves, the cloud of spiritual energy didn't possess the strength to compress itself into a concentrated fragment. However, it had done a decent job at it. As long as it received a push...

"We can combine strengths!"

Ves quickly enacted his plan. He added his strength to the spiritual energy. Combined, they exerted enough force to push past their own limits!

"Compress!"

As the cloud grew increasingly smaller and denser, it emitted a stronger aura that bore the unmistakable mark of Prophet Ylvaine! The spiritual energy grew increasingly more active and energetic as it was being pressed into a more compact form. A lot of processes took place that Ves didn't understand.

The creation of a strong spiritual fragment was much more profound than creating a weak spiritual fragment!

It was as if he was bringing something to life which had already died! The growing holy aura surrounding the nutrient pack wrapper made it feel as if he was resurrecting the prophet!

"Come to life!"

A highly energetic eruption blinded his spiritual senses!

A wave of pure holiness swept through his body! Even Lucky became affected as he arched his back and hissed!

"Damn!"

Whatever happened must have proliferated throughout the entire compound and be surrounding street! Ves didn't know if anyone was spiritually sensitive enough to recognize where it came from, but he needed to move fast if he wanted to avoid getting caught!

As his senses started to recover, Ves quickly observed the nutrient pack wrapper and found that he succeeded in compressing it into a solid fragment!

This was what he wanted from the start!

He projected his Spirituality and firmly grabbed hold of the holy spiritual fragment. He still donned his mask of Prophet Ylvaine this time, so the spiritual fragment didn't resist being taken out of the nutrient pack wrapper.

While the wrapper had been its home for centuries, it was a highly undignified object for such a strong spiritual remnant!

As soon as Ves deposited the fragment in his mind, he instantly turned to Lucky and held out the spiritless relic.

"Eat it, Lucky!"

"Meow!"

"This isn't the time to say no! Hurry up before someone comes!"

Even though Lucky looked at the nutrient pack wrapper with distaste, he knew what was at stake. With great reluctance, the mechanical cat flew over and munched on the relic.

The cat hated every bite! Nonetheless, it kept eating because if he didn't, Ves would get arrested! Once that happened, who would buy him exotics to eat?

As soon as Lucky finished the last bite, the cat resentfully jumped at Ves and swiped at his cheek with unpowered alloy claws.

"OUCH! LUCKY YOU BASTARD! WHAT WAS THAT FOR?!"

Even though Lucky refrained from employing his deadly energy claws, the scratch that Ves incurred bit deeply across his face and over his lips!

Lucky was really pissed this time! Who wanted to eat a centuries-old preserved nutrient pack wrapper?!

After teaching his owner a lesson, Lucky turned incorporeal and slipped through the wall!

Shortly afterwards, a couple of Protector guards forced their way into the room. Evidently, the spiritual eruption earlier discomfited the Kronons stationed at the compound and prompted them to perform a thorough inspection.

When the guards encountered Ves, he had already moved to the bathroom in order to treat his wound.

"What happened, Mr. Larkinson?!"

"Nothing serious. I was just playing around with my mechanical pet."

This was a rather weak excuse as mechanical pets were hardwired not to harm humans, but how else could he explain his coagulating wounds? It was far too distinctive to mistake for anything else!

However, the injury successfully distracted the guards assigned to inspect his room. They stopped thinking about the strange feeling that swept through their minds and bodies and instead began to wonder if Lucky had been hacked or something!

"There's nothing wrong with my pet! It's way more sophisticated than you think!"

It took a lot of arguing for the Protectors to lay their hands off Lucky. While his pet could easily run away if he was targeted, that might expose some capabilities that Ves really didn't want anyone else to know!

After almost an entire hour of searching, the Protector guards loosened their vigilance, though they remained on high alert.

Ves tentatively determined that none of them were sensitive enough to associate the wave that swept over them with the holy relic that went missing.

It was very hard to tie the theft to Ves in the first place, so the Kronon guards didn't take any drastic action.

As the alert level among the Protectors went back to normal, Ves became increasingly giddy. He succeeded in making off with the spoils! Incurring a scratch from Lucky was a small price to pay now that the holy relic was unquestionably gone!

Prophet Ylvaine's spiritual fragment rested peacefully in the corner of his mindspace.

Well, peacefully was a relative term. It showed very obvious discomfort in its new surroundings once it realized that it had entered the mind of a non-believer!

The spiritual fragment seemed to realize that it had been hoodwinked!

For now, the fragment didn't resist its new surroundings too much. It had only been recently created and was very weak and unaccustomed to its new strength.

Ves also managed to soothe the hurt feelings of the fragment by wrapping the image of Prophet Ylvaine around it like a comfy blanket that smelled a lot like its source.

The two were already starting to merge. Due to the huge disparity in strength, the spiritual fragment was slowly absorbing the traits that Ves cultivated in the image.

Most of the elements that Ves passed on served to compliment the absolute belief contained within the spiritual fragment. Added details about Prophet Ylvaine's life and experiences also blended into the fragment, which helped define its beliefs and make them more distinctive.

Overall, the merger process would take some time before it finished. Until then, Ves needed to figure out how he could keep it under control.

"I feel like I've implanted a bomb into my mind!"

If Ves didn't address the matter soon, he might end up dying due to his own ingenuity!

"I should have put a lot more thought about this before I embarked on this experiment!"

He regretted not experimenting this step beforehand but it was already too late. Right now, he needed to come up with a solution on the fly.

The Ylvaine's spiritual fragment was not as alive as Qilanxo's spiritual fragment. In the first place, Ves didn't even know if Prophet Ylvaine developed any significant spirituality during his lifetime.

"It might explain why he converted so many people."

Yet if Ylvaine had always been an average in this aspect, then the spiritual fragment he refined was far stronger than its source had ever been!

"The child is stronger than the parent!"

Another relevant factor was that the strengthened spiritual fragment did not encompass the full range of Ylvaine's personality. It only started off as miniscule smudges of his strongest thoughts, beliefs and sentiments. Even after being amplified by a thousand times or more, this still hadn't changed!

While merging with the image that Ves constructed added more complexity to the spiritual fragment, it still possessed a one-track mind.

The only thing the spiritual fragment cared about was maintaining absolute faith! Nothing else was more important than holding on to the beliefs that Prophet Ylvaine held during his lifetime!

Perhaps the key to handling the spiritual fragment was to negotiate with it. Ves and the spiritual fragment didn't necessarily have to be enemies. They could both get what they wanted out of each other!

"It's worth a try!"

#### **Chapter 1207 End-Of-Life Managemen**

Everything was negotiable. While the amplified remnant of Prophet Ylvaine's spirituality strongly disliked residing in the mind of a non-believer, it nonetheless possessed its own wants and needs.

Taking advantage of its limited wisdom, Ves showed the spiritual fragment an image of the mech he planned to design and intimated that it would reside in the mechs he planned to make.

The negotiation proceeded largely along the lines he expected. He felt like a parent urging a child to wait before a cake finished baking.

As long as the spiritual fragment waited for a time, he'd be able to reside in a much better home than his mind or Ylvaine's old nutrient pack wrapper.

Although Ves hadn't beautified its external appearance yet, his draft design already looked a thousand times more impressive than anything the spiritual fragment had ever seen!

It took little effort to coax the spiritual fragment to stay put and remain patient.

The successful negotiation lifted a weight off his shoulder. If the spiritual fragment really wanted to, it could have resisted its stay in his mind. With the sheer amount of spiritual accumulation it assimilated, Ves didn't know if he could win such a confrontation.

Nonetheless, for all of its power, the spiritual fragment was as smart as a bot. It didn't possess the complex mind of a complete human. Ves also managed to read the fragment's emotions and impulses like an open book.

He was glad that he managed to convince Ylvaine's spiritual fragment to wait for it to reside in his upcoming mech design. He could tell that the spiritual fragment underwent a huge transformation ever since he compressed it. While the quantity of spiritual energy remained the same, the quality of it constantly increased due to some unknown interactions.

There was a marked difference between a loose cloud and a solid fragment of spiritual energy. Ves never researched the differences in depth before, so he took note of what happened.

He already cataloged one change. The spiritual fragment's aura became significantly stronger but also more controllable. If the fragment didn't chose to restrain its aura, Ves would have turned into a beacon of holiness!

This was really bad because the Ylvainan authorities were still crazily searching for their missing holy relic!



It was a shame it no longer existed. Once it entered Lucky's tummy, there was no way the relic could be restored. Even if the Ylvainans could have fabricated an exact copy of the nutrient pack wrapper, it simply wouldn't hold the same significance as the old one.

He made a conscious decision to destroy the holy relic rather than to return it to the Ylvainans.

Returning it might placate the Ylvainans, but not all of them. The Attendants of Ylvaine, the hardliners and the traditionalists would probably scratch their heads for a second before continuing their vigorous hunt for the culprits.

Giving back the nutrient pack wrapper might also give the authorities some clues on who was responsible. While he trusted Lucky not to leave any traces on the wrapper, who knew what kind of advanced technology the Ylvainans deployed to figure out who touched the wrapper.

Both Ves and Lucky physically touched the holy relic! Even if Ves left a tiny skin flake on the nutrient pack wrapper, the Ylvainans would certainly be able to dig it out and record its attributes.

After that, it was a very simple procedure to subject everyone in the Kesseling System to a matching test!

Ves simply couldn't take the risk of returning the relic. Perhaps Calabast would have disagreed and come up with some solutions, but he couldn't afford to wait that long to coordinate with her. Getting rid of the evidence was the simplest, fastest way to cut off the trail!

As far as he knew, none of the Ylvainans suspected that Ves and his companions did anything.

Ketis was working on her contribution to the draft design and cuddling Lucky.

Gavin mostly spent his time on managing their business affairs in the Protectorate and at home.

Leland stopped going out for obvious reasons and simply watched the news broadcasts or read the local news publications.

Perhaps the most suspicious of them all was Ves, who spent much of his time in his room with his Privacy Shield turned on. Since Calabast reminded him that the Ylvainans tracked his usage of sensor-blocking measures, Ves purposely maintained the same pattern despite not doing anything special aside from fleshing out his draft design.

He merely wanted to fool the Ylvainan monitors that he was very touchy and private about his design work.

Perhaps the Protectors of the Faith responsible for guarding the compound suspected that Ves might be up to something.

Still, whatever they thought he was doing, the monitors probably didn't think that Ves had anything to do with the theft of the nutrient pack wrapper. He hadn't met with anyone aside from Calabast and there was nowhere he could hide the nutrient pack wrapper.

Due to the high value of the holy relic, no one would think that he would take the trouble to steal it only to destroy it afterwards!

Ves therefore relaxed and let down his guard a bit. As long as he didn't act suspiciously, the Ylvainans should have no reason to turn their attention to him. Although martial law was still very much in effect, the guest compound turned into an oasis of calm in Krent.

Together with Ketis, he smoothly added more detail to his draft design.

After he obtained Ylvaine's spiritual fragment and merged it with the image he constructed of the same man, he took advantage of its presence. Whenever

he sketched out the visual design of his hero mech, he took note of the fragment's reaction.

Even if it largely kept to itself, Ves knew that it was constantly observing his actions.

This was one of the downsides to hosting a spiritual fragment in his mind. It was just like his Mastery experiences, except in reverse. Ves would never feel at ease if he hosted an unfriendly or very sophisticated and intelligent fragment in his mind!

"Why do I feel like it's getting smarter everyday?"

He never worried too much about Qilanxo's spiritual fragment as it originated from an exobeast. It didn't share any of humanity's complexity, duplicity and greed. As powerful as it was, Qilanxo's spiritual fragment had always been friendly.

Ves couldn't say the same for Ylvaine's spiritual fragment. It originated from a very controversial figure in history and inherited at least some traits. He constantly felt as if the spiritual fragment was learning from his observations.

Was this what his hosts felt like when they became aware of his presence in their minds?

What he could do to his hosts during his Mastery experiences, the spiritual fragments could do as well! While his mind and spirit were far more robust, if Ves wasn't careful, his consciousness might be displaced one day due to a moment of carelessness!

It came down to strength. As long as the strength of the spiritual fragment didn't exceed his defenses, Ves possessed some reassurance that he would be able to block any incursions.

He still felt inordinately vulnerable for hosting a foreign entity in his mind. It was like hosting a potential enemy inside his castle!

This looming threat made him consider what he could do to defend himself against a spiritual fragment that had gone rogue.

He came up with two possible solutions.

First, he could build a castle inside his castle. As long as he could wall off his design seed, consciousness and other important parts of his mind, he'd be able to stall a hostile presence long enough to mount a counterattack.

"That still doesn't address the fundamental shortcoming of hosting an enemy inside my castle. My interior defenses will never be as strong as my exterior defenses."

Second, he could create a temporary home for the spiritual fragment. As long as the spiritual fragment no longer sided in his mind, it needed to break through the walls of his castle before it could go inside.

Yet how would he go about constructing a temporary home in the first place? And how could he prevent the spiritual fragment from opening the door and leaving for better pastures?

"As long as it resides within my castle, it won't be able to leave without breaking through the walls."

His mind also served as a secure container for his spiritual fragments. Any other home was an empty shell that it could depart anytime it wanted to, including his own designs!

This made him wonder what would happen once his mech designs aged. Ves had already retired his Marc Anthony models. Both the Blackbeak and Crystal Lord models were up for retirement as well.

While their design spirits would live on in the physical copies that existed in the wild, how long would it take before the last Blackbeaks and Crystal Lords were put in a museum or mech depot?

"Maybe they'll stay. Maybe they'll leave."

The design spirits he helped create were all strongly attached to their mech designs. Perhaps many of them never contemplated leaving. Yet Ves couldn't be sure if all of them wanted to remain loyal until they were dead or forgotten.

Ves wasn't sure if it would be good or bad for design spirits to hop out of a retired mech design. Where would they go? Would they fade away in the imaginary realm or would they seek out other mech designs to become their new design spirits?

The possibility made him grimace. He knew far too little about spirituality and spirits to know for sure.

As a mech designer and an entrepreneur, Ves should have thought about the product life cycle of his mechs. End-of-life management formed an integral part of today's society. While it was easy to recycle an old mech and reuse most of its materials in newer products, the same might not be true for their design spirits.

Was Ves polluting the mech industry with rogue design spirits every time he retired one of his mech designs? Who knew.

He called up the designs of his Marc Anthony Mark I and Mark II and noted that they still possessed the same degree of X-Factor.

"They're still there."

That reassured him a bit. At the very least, his retired designs still provided a comfortable home for his design spirits.

"Yet what happened with the Marc Anthony models aren't indicative of what will happen in the future."

The images he created for his oldest designs all carried his spiritual imprint and were absolutely loyal to him. Starting from the Crystal Lord, Ves began to make use of foreign spiritual fragment to empower the images used in forming the design spirits of his mech designs.

Ves continually had to keep track of the wants and needs of his design spirits.

"The best way to maintain the status quo is to refresh the designs." He determined.

He didn't want to lose track of a design spirit as strong and remarkable as that of the Aurora Titan. Considering its strong bond with Jannzi Larkinson, the best course of action would be to design an Aurora Titan Mark II and so on in order to keep it in his sphere of influence.

That brought to mind another question. Could a single design spirit occupy multiple designs?

For example, could Qilanxo's spiritual fragment become the patron of both the Aurora Titan Mark I and Mark II?

It might be possible, especially if the designs were part of a single product line.

A related question popped up. Could he extend the same design spirit across an entire product family?

Could a single mech design host multiple design spirits?

These questions were very important for Ves because the answers determined his strategy for the Protectorate market going forward. If possible, he wanted every mech sold by the LMC to the Protectorate to carry the influence of devout Ylvainan design spirit.

Ves fell into very deep thought. "I'll have to see if any of this is possible. It will save me a lot of trouble if I can reuse the same thing over and over again."

### Chapter 1208 Spreading the Gospel

Spiritual fragments were valuable and very hard to obtain. To get Ylvaine's spiritual fragment, Ves not only had to steal a culturally-important relic, but also perform several dangerous spiritual techniques.

Ves did not relish repeating the experience every time he designed an Ylvainan mech or adapted his other mech designs to the local market.

He began to consider if he should turn Ylvaine's spiritual fragment into a communal design spirit. It would be great if it could encompass every mech his company sold in the Protectorate's mech market.

While his understanding of spirituality was too shallow to know the answer, he seriously entertained the notion. The convenience of sharing a single design spirit over multiple designs was too great for him to ignore.

Naturally, this didn't mean he decided to become lazy and reuse his old design spirits all the time. He merely wanted to apply this solution in cases where the costs outweighed the gains.

Cases where the LMC adapted his future mech designs to the Protectorate's mech market definitely applied in this case.

If he couldn't arrange a solution like this, what else could he do? He doubted it was easy to steal another relic, especially if it used to belong to Prophet Ylvaine. One theft already alarmed the Protectorate. Another theft would probably make the Ylvainans go berserk!

"It's just a nutrient pack wrapper." He muttered. "What's the big deal?"

A wave of disapproval emanated from Ylvaine's spiritual fragment.

"Pff."

Ever since the fragment settled in his mind and underwent an evolution, it started to take note of what Ves was doing. Each time he did something that maligned the Ylvainans or their faith, the fragment emanated a pulse of disapproval.

"It's like living with a priest in my mind."

Actually, it was worse than that! Hosting a remnant of the founder of the Ylvainan Faith was probably a dream for most Ylvainans, but Ves hated the experience!

More than one time, Ves contemplated whether he should fabricate a miniature mech or something in order to temporarily house the fragment.

However, if he did something like that, then the object was at risk of getting stolen. Perhaps his Ylvainan guards might confiscate the miniature because they perceived its holiness somehow.

At the very least, hosting the fragment in his mind allowed him to shield most of its aura and keep it within reach if it ever wanted to escape.

"You're not going anywhere."

Another reason prompted him to retain the fragment in his mind. He hoped to develop a bond with the fragment through their constant interactions.

While they held very different beliefs and outlooks on life, Ves hoped that he could earn its respect. As long as the spiritual fragment appreciated Ves, it was much more likely to pay along with what he had in store for it in the future.

This was because Ves wanted to reuse it in other mechs and designs tailored to the Ylvainans.

He originally intended to use it for his upcoming hero mech design, but why should he limit its usage? The fragment was very strong but also very



versatile. Ves hadn't specifically limited it to a single mech type or mech design.

Its strongest component was its purity and absolute faith. The fragment didn't offer much else besides that. This made it particularly suitable for augmenting other mech designs with their own design spirits.

As long as they could play along, Ylvaine's design spirit could act as a kind of holy seasoning for every dish he cooked for the Ylvainans.

"This is the best solution."

He was glad that he didn't add too much complexity in the image he formed out of Prophet Ylvaine. He was also glad that he didn't employ the Triple Division technique and attempted to lock the fragment into a specific mech type. Its current universality was an essential trait if Ves wanted to realize his current plans.

When Ves carefully proposed his ideas to the spiritual fragment, it answered with confusion and befuddlement. It didn't understand the context of what Ves wanted to do. It hardly even knew anything about mechs, as Prophet Ylvaine never lived to see the transition to the Age of mechs.

"Maybe I have to present my proposal in a different way."

Ves thought about the essence of Prophet Ylvaine's life. The man believed he received extraordinary revelations and thought he had the duty to spread them. Ylvaine defined himself as a messenger who wanted to spread his gospel to as many people as possible!

His eyes lit up. While Prophet Ylvaine was already dead, the remnant of his spirituality could take over this mission!

"Think about it! The more mechs you encompass, the more in touch you'll be with your originator's followers!"

Ves imagined a future where millions of mechs produced by the LMC proliferated in the Ylvainan mech market. While each of them carried their distinctive traits, they all shared something in common.

They were all connected to the same design spirit!

Not only would the design spirit get in touch with more Ylvainan believers, but it could also spread its influence throughout the Protectorate and beyond!

"The more mechs you are connected to, the more you'll be able to spread your message!"

While Ves didn't know if this was even possible, the vision he presented was compelling enough to earn the spiritual fragment's approval!

Ever since then, the fragment behaved a little more at ease with its current circumstances. As long as Ves delivered on his promises, the fragment would be able to continue the mission of its source.

It continued to cast judgement over Ves, though. Its nature hadn't changed at all.

Ves ignored the constant pulses of approval and disapproval and turned his attention back to his work. At this stage, Ves and Ketis had done all they could to finalize their draft and vision for their hero mech.

They were ready to proceed to the next step in the design process and pick out the parts that best complimented their vision.

"We should proceed to the mech workshop that Madame Cecily has reserved for us." He said. "Although it's rather risky to travel back and forth, it's much better to develop a mech design over there than at home."

Ketis nodded. "Before we go, isn't it about time we name the design? I'm tired of calling it 'our hero mech design' or 'our Ylvainan mech design'."

"You're right. It's about time it gets a name."

That put them both to thought. The name of the mech was especially important to Ves because it helped prime his audience's perspectives.

His hero mech design was meant to be a groundbreaking work that opened up the LMC's access to the Protectorate mech market. Ves intended to prove that even a non-believer could design and produce a fantastic Ylvainan mech.

Refining Ylvaine's spiritual fragment was the most essential step to his plan, and completing it meant he was well on his way to seeing it come into fruition. A good name complimented the effect he wanted to achieve.

"The overall theme of the mech is centered around the prophet the Ylvainans revere." Ves stated. Not only its X-Factor, but also its visual design reflected the mech's dedication to Prophet Ylvaine. "We should pick a name that refers to him but not in a vulgar and disrespectful manner."

Considering that the six hero mechs he intended to make would be centered around the six virtues he selected, Ves wanted to name the design that reflected this set.

Out of all the inspirations that Ves could draw upon, he never expected Ylvaine's spiritual fragment to provide him with a suggestion!

Fortunately, the spiritual fragment possessed at least some sensibility in its suggestion. The prophet named a lot of things over his lifetime.

"Let's call it.. the Transcendent Messenger."

"Sounds decent." Ketis said.

She didn't care about the Ylvainan Faith at all so she hardly paid attention to the meaning and symbolism behind the name.

To Ves, it was a particularly clever and elegant name for what he intended to design. While the name didn't entirely fit with its violent, momentum-based fighting style, the meaning fit its intended design spirit very well.

While Prophet Ylvaine never referred to himself as a messenger in public all that often, the word definitely referred to the prophet without being too direct. By referring to the prophet in an indirect fashion, Ves avoided stepping onto the toes of the more extreme and devout believers. They probably wouldn't like it if Ves 'profaned' the name of their prophet.

Just calling the mech design the 'Messenger' was not enough. That sounded far too generic and conjured up the image of an antiquated courier who delivered packages to people.

"My mech isn't that kind of messenger."

That was why the spiritual fragment added Transcendant to the name. Ves sensed that the fragment seemed to use that word to describe its own remarkable existence.

When you think about it, the spiritual fragment was a living continuation of the prophet! Apparently, it became smart enough to reflect on its its existence and decided that its current state fit the definition of a transcended lifeform!

Ves almost wanted to barf when he figured that out. Did it think that it was immortal or something? It was just a spiritual remnant with delusions of godhood!

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He shook his head. Sure enough, Ylvaine was just as delusional alive and dead. Even a remnant of the prophet believed his prophecies came true!

Now that they fixed a name for their mech, they proceeded to go out on the streets for the first time in weeks.

The Protectors of the Faith and the Avatars of Myth both geared up their mechs and began to escort the armored shuttle that Ves and Ketis boarded.

The procession moved slowly through the largely-empty streets of Krent. Due to the persistent martial law, the city had been turned into a ghost town where most of its residents locked themselves in their homes. They only met other Protectors of the Faith or government vehicles along the way.

Ves paid little attention to the desolation he caused. Instead, he turned his gaze towards Lucky, who was playfully cuddling with Ketis.

"Hihihi!" She giggled. "You're such a cutie pie, Lucky! Do you want another kiss?"

"Meow!"

As Ketis smooched Lucky's head, to the cat's delight, Ves began to frown.

He couldn't take it anymore. "Lucky, come over here. You love hugs, right?"

The cat ignored his words and continued to snuggle in Ketis' embrace. Both of them seemed to be having the time of their lives while Ves was left aside!

"Come on! Haven't you gotten over my transgression yet? It was an emergency!"

Luck briefly turned his head towards Ves and sent an acid glare while flipping his tail at his owner. The cat turned back to Ketis lidded his eyes in pleasure.

It became clear to Ves that his pet hadn't forgiven him at all!

"Luckyyy..." Ves whined. "I miss you."

"Meow!" Lucky huffed and proceeded to ignore Ves for the rest of the trip.

"What did you do to him, Ves?" Ketis asked as she blatantly enjoyed Lucky's affection.

"I fed him something he didn't like."

She smirked. "Wow, no wonder Lucky hates you. He cares more about food than anything else. It's practically animal abuse to feed him something that he doesn't want to eat!"

"I'm not an animal abuser!"

Ves felt like puking blood. Even Ketis took Lucky's side!

"You know, Lucky's a really great pet." She commented. "Do you think it's possible for me to get a pet on my own? I want something as smart as Lucky."

"Mechanical pets that are as smart as Lucky are extremely hard to come by."

Ves pointed out. "You're better off obtaining a biological pet that's been genetically modified to be tame and smart."

Mechanical pets were fine for normal families, but they were too susceptible to hacking for people with means. Ves would have to import a pet from a first-rate superstate in order to obtain a reliable mechanical companion, but the cost was too extravagant.

Ketis showed her puppy eyes at him. "Please, Ves. I really want my own pet! Can't you get me something for my birthday?"

"I'll think of something." He promised.

### **Chapter 1209 Power Over Efficiency**

Ves seriously contemplated gifting Ketis with a pet after they finished the design project.

Her contribution so far was very promising. Enlisting a mech designer who possessed a deep understanding of swordsmanship had been remarkably helpful in defining the melee capabilities of their Transcendent Messenger design. What she lacked in technical acumen, Ves could neatly make up for it in spades.

Therefore, rewarding her with a pet would convey his appreciation for her efforts. He invested a lot in taking her under his wing and bringing her up to this level. That that he had reached the point of harvesting the fruit, he needed to make sure he kept watering the tree to keep it pleased.

Adding another pet to their company would also give Ves something else to hug if he pissed off Lucky for whatever reason.

"Meow." Lucky affectionately rubbed his cheek against Ketis while excitedly swinging his tail.

His cat had turned into a total kitten in her embrace! He never acted so cutely in his grasp! Lucky was deliberately taunting Ves!

Ves decided that he should get a biological pet. They weren't as vulnerable to hacking as mechanical pets and they added some much needed variety in their company.

The Komodo Star Sector hosted a large cottage industry of pet designers. Geneticists obtained live specimens of extraordinary exobeasts captured from a wild planet in the star sector or in the frontier and tweaked their genes to turn them into the perfect pets.

Pet designers even had their own association that certified the genetically-modified exobeasts they sold as premium designer pets. These safeguards minimized the chance that pet designers sneakily inserted biological programming in their pets that went against the interests of their buyers.

As Ves studied Ketis for a moment, he decided to obtain a pet adapted from a species in the frontier. A ferocious-looking beast would remind her of her roots and hopefully keep her company often enough that Lucky would spend more time with him instead.

"Lucky is mine!" He jealously declared.

Unfortunately, the cat didn't seem to think so, because he continued to cling on Ketis' shoulders by the time the armored shuttle arrived at the mech workshop.

"We're here."

The pair stepped out of the shuttle alongside their guards. The workshop was situated in the outskirts of Krent. The place appeared to be an independent workshop and design studio suited for a small mech company.

It reminded him of his first workshop when he just started out. The biggest difference was that the current site offered a lot more space for hosting mechs and storage containers.

All of this room was being put to good use as the Protectors of the Faith and the Avatars of Myth settled in. The Protectors already upgraded its security systems beforehand.

As Ves, Ketis and Lucky walked out of the landing zone of the complex and neared the entrance, they looked up at the recently-installed sign.

LIVING MECH YLVAINE CORPORATION

"This place belongs to that joint venture you're talking about, right?" She asked.

"Yup."

"Doesn't seem like much."

The place was completely empty and desolate. Aside from automated bots that cleaned and maintained the complex, not a single living being could be found that didn't belong to the Protectors.

Ves smiled. "This is just the start. The LMYC will certainly become a household name in the Protectorate. We'll have to work very hard these next couple of months in order to make that happen."



The foreign entity residing his mind radiated a strong pulse of approval. Projecting unflinching hope and confidence in the face of difficult circumstances strongly aligned with its values.

Lately, Ves felt as if he was a dog being trained by Ylvaine's spiritual fragment. Through expressing its approval and disapproval, it continually tried to steer Ves towards a different pattern of behavior.

Most of the time, he ignored the opinions of the spiritual fragment. He wasn't an Ylvainan and had no desire to convert to the Faith.

However, Ves didn't relish racking up a constant stream of disapproval from the rigid spiritual fragment either. The constant irritation of being told he was doing something wrong irked him so much that he basically threw up his hands and altered his behavior to stop the nagging.

"Geez. You're not my mother." He quietly muttered.

Ves intended to step up the pace. Not only was he in a hurry to meet his self-imposed deadline, he also wanted to get rid of Ylvaine's spiritual fragment as fast as possible!

"Let's enter."

They entered the empty workshop and settled in. Both designers took the time to explore the facilities and inspect and familiarize themselves with the workshop and lab equipment.

Meanwhile, Lucky wandered by himself to see if there was any minerals for him to munch.

Ves shook his head. "You don't have to scavenge for something to eat, Lucky. Remember my promise? I'll let you order all the minerals I've promised. It will take some time to ship them all to the workshop though."

"Meow!"

Lucky temporarily forgave him when Ves activated a terminal and began to browse a virtual marketplace that offered a huge variety of raw materials to mech designers.

Together, they ordered a large mix of low and medium-grade exotics worth roughly a billion bright credits. As soon as Ves finalized the order and transferred the credits out of his personal bank account, the cat immediately ditched his lap and sought out Ketis' company!

Ves felt sick. "Lucky! You traitor! Am I just a food dispenser to you?!"

Lucky flippantly swung his tail at Ves before he ran out of sight.

Even Ylvaine's spiritual fragment radiated its disapproval at Ves.

"Not you too?!"

He sullenly pushed his strained relationship with his pet aside and went to work.

Both Ketis and Ves found a design room that had been stocked with wide projectors and terminals with advanced design software.

"Let's proceed with selecting the parts." He said. "I'll allow you to select the saber model and other components related to the Transcendent Messenger's close-combat abilities. Do you think you can do that?"

She nodded. "I know what to look out for, Ves. I can read a spec sheet a lot better now that I've read up on all the related theories."

The two proceeded to seek out the parts they wanted. Their vision for the hero mech guided their search through the extensive component library provided by the Curin Dynasty.

While Ketis flicked through a huge list of mech sabers, Ves turned his attention to the more fundamental components.

The budget that Calabast had set for the commission was very generous. Ves had an opportunity to design a mech that was at least two to three times more expensive than the Aurora Titan!

Fortunately, most of the parts that the Curin Dynasty licenses had been designed by foreign developers. Ves recognized some of the names and brands in the catalog and they were all up to regional standards.

"That's a relief."

He carefully made his selection according to the criteria he set beforehand. Mobility and momentum formed an integral part of the Transcendant Messenger, so Ves started with the power reactor and mech engine.

For the selection of both, he slightly emphasized raw power over efficiency.

Normally, he prioritized the latter, but a bodyguard mech wasn't meant to slog it out in a hostile battlefield for days. Most battles of this nature were opportunistic, hit-and-run attacks.

Whether the assault had failed or succeeded, the assailants never stuck around for long. There was no advantage to be gained by entering into a battle of attrition. Reinforcements could arrive at any moment!

For this reason, Ves picked out premium power reactor and mech engine models out of the catalog. Both of them came with fancy names and high material costs if Ves ever wanted to reproduce them, but their performance was very stellar.

"As long as a battle doesn't drag on for more than thirty minutes, the Transcendant Messenger can overpower practically any standard mech!"

The selection of the artificial musculature system not only affected a mech's mobility, but also their mechanical strength. Both of these factors determined the amount of damage a mech could inflict with a melee weapon.

For this reason, Ves and Ketis both sought out an artificial musculature system that was marked by strength. However, this strength came at the cost of flexibility, agility and reaction speed.

"It's fine." Ves told Ketis. "A hero mech simply can't wield its weapon in the same way a swordsman mech does. They split their power between their melee weapon and ranged weapon and employ them both in combination."

If everything else was equal, a hero mech could never match a rifleman mech in marksmanship and a swordsman mech in swordsmanship. They were never designed to fight on their opponent's terms!

If faced with a rifleman mech, it would best for the hero mech to use its prodigious mobility to charge closer and force the enemy mech into a close-quarters brawl.

If faced with a swordsman mech, the hero mech should instead maintain distance and kite the other mech while peppering it with a constant barrage of premium explosive shells.

In practice, Ves didn't envision this scenario happening all the time. Sometimes, the sheer difference in quality was more than make up for the hero mech's shortcomings!

Ves still reserved most of his budget towards the armor system. The Transcendent Messenger was supposed to be a high-mobility, high-impact mech.

On the surface, both priorities contradicted each other.

A high-mobility mech was best paired with a lighter armor system. They should be as thin as weight-efficient as possible to minimize their impact on a mech's speed, acceleration and agility.

A high-impact mech on the other hand was best served with heavier and more robust armor systems. As long as the mech had the time and space to build up a charge, the heavier armor would serve the mech well in absorbing and negating the damage it incurred upon impact.

Heavier armor also meant that any collisions that ensued would have a higher chance of destabilizing the opponent's mech instead of the hero mech!

Think about it. How ridiculous would it be if a light skirmisher attempted to collide against a heavy knight? The smaller mech would bounce right off the larger and heavier mech's shield!

Due to the high performance of the mech engine he selected, Ves opted to go for a heavier armor system.

After a bit of searching, he eventually settled on an armor system designed for medium striker mechs.

Striker mechs were regarded as close-combat ranged mechs. They were meant to counter quick and agile light mechs with wide-area weapons such as shotguns and flamethrowers.

Their armor was fairly heavy, but not to the point of matching that of a defensive medium knight.

From all the parts they selected so far, Ves estimated that the Transcendent Messenger's total mass should be equivalent to that of the Blackbeak. This was in line with his criteria as both of them bore some resemblance in their mech concepts.

At least when it came to their melee capabilities, they were both designed to close in to the enemy and use their frightening momentum to deliver a powerful impact upon arrival!

Ves didn't face any difficult choices after he made this selection. While the cockpit, sensors, energy cells and other components were just as important to the hero mech, any decent model would do the job.

On her part, Ketis had already settled for the saber model and various internal auxiliary components meant to strengthen the mech's ability to exert force.

Once they completed their shopping list, Ves nodded in satisfaction. "That's it for our selection. Now, we have to piece them all together in a coherent design."

Ketis and petted Lucky's head. "I can't wait to turn this mech into a saber maniac."

They had a long couple of months ahead of them. Ves hoped that the inherent complexity of hero mechs wouldn't pose too much of a hindrance.

#### **Chapter 1210 Internal Auto Designer**

A lot of time went by as Ves and Ketis fell into a quiet routine. Each day, they commuted to the mech workshop and worked on the design.

If Ves had to estimate their relative contribution to the mech design, then he was responsible for about ninety percent of the design while Ketis took care of just ten percent.

Ketis didn't bear that much responsibility. She mainly spent her efforts on assisting in the design of the heavy saber, weapon arm and artificial musculature. She also helped design the overall body shape of the hero mech in order to make sure it could leverage as much mechanical power as possible to assist in its melee attacks.

Due to her inexperience and relative lack of knowledge, she worked a lot slower than Ves. Still, the large amount of practical insight she lent to the design project owing to her in-depth mastery of swordsmanship was enough to elevate her to the status of contributing designer.

Just because Ves was a Journeyman didn't mean that a Novice like Ketis played no role. Any mech designer could offer valuable contributions as long as their specialty covered an area in which he hadn't paid too much attention.

At her current stage, Ketis couldn't express her design philosophy in an extraordinary fashion. What little influence she imprinted onto the Transcendent Messenger design was so miniscule that Ves would have to use a spiritual microscope to sense.

"That will probably change in the future." He muttered.

His collaboration with Professor Ventag already showed him the potential of working together with stronger mech designers. As long as their design philosophies didn't clash or occupy the same ground, they could compliment or in some cases even synergize with each other!

This especially seemed to be the case with a design philosophy that encompassed a single aspect of an entire mech. Mech designers like Ves possessed a rare advantage in that he could collaborate with nearly every other mech designer.

The only instance where he couldn't do so is if he encountered a mech designer who also specialized in X-Factor and spirituality!

Of course, those were concerns for the future. Right now, Ves took responsibility for the bulk of the design work on the Transcendent Messenger.

"Working on a hero mech is a whole new dimension."

While he already possessed prior design experience with hero mechs, the Ouroboros was a very different beast compared to the Transcendent Messenger.

Not only did he design the Ouroboros in a day with the help of an auto designer system, but he also made ample use of Terran high technology. Any

first-class mech could still defeat hundreds of Transcendent Messenger without breaking a sweat!

Ves felt as if he had fallen from heaven after having a taste of Terran design principles. The premium, third-class mech parts he selected may enjoy a lot of regard in the Bright Republic and Ylvaine Protectorate, but they were worse than trash in a first-rate superstate!

Each part was at least three times bigger but performed at least ten or a hundred times worse! The vast discrepancy in power and capability rudely dragged Ves into the realities of third-class mech design.

Inferior technology, inferior materials, inferior fabrication methods, inferior mech pilots and inferior mech designers all resulted in mechs that seemed like toys compared to the apex war machines of the Terran Confederation.

He sighed. "I'm suffering from tech envy again."

He learned a lot from his latest Mastery experience, but reminiscing about all the advanced tech he witnessed only fueled his tech envy.

Just like after he returned from the Starlight Megalodon, Ves had to adjust his mindset and forget about most of the wondrous tech he came in touch with. Only by letting go was he able to liberate himself from the poisonous influence of tech envy and concentrate on making the Transcendent Messenger the best hero mech he could design at this time.

Once he embarked on designing a hero mech without the use of a cheat-like auto designer system, Ves experienced first-hand the enormous challenges of incorporating two completely different weapon systems on a single mech.

Fortunately, his prior experience with designing hybrid knights prevented him from getting lost.



"The key to mechs with multiple weapon systems is their internal architecture." Ves lectured to Ketis at the start. "We've selected a lot of great parts, but it's going to be a challenge to stuff them together in a mech frame that only offers a limited amount of space. A good internal architecture design will be able to encompass more parts with the least amount of channels and internal support structures."

This was far harder to do with mechs that employed multiple systems. Ves felt constrained by the limited internal volume at his disposal.

If that wasn't enough, he also struggled with the inherent asymmetrical nature of his hero mech design. A mech that wielded a saber with one arm and a ballistic rifle with the other arm would always be skewed.

This problem needed to be addressed in a comprehensive fashion when he designed the internal architecture of his mech.

The simplest way to describe his solution would be to say that he fought asymmetry with asymmetry.

Was there too much mass slanted towards the saber side of the mech? Then Ves would just place more heavy structures towards the rifle side of the mech.

Although this sounded simple, the actual solutions were extremely complex because Ves seemingly juggled more than a hundred parameters at the same time!

If Ves was still an Apprentice, then he doubted that he could do a good job by himself. The amount of calculations he needed to perform and the intricate, interconnected trade offs he needed to make were too much for any mortal to bear.

"It's a good thing I'm no longer constrained by human limitations."

His superhuman mental attributes and his optimized genes already helped him bear the burden he placed on his shoulders.

However, what was new was the influence of his design seed. Ves already knew that its presence holistically boosted his mech design capabilities. Yet only until he worked without an auto designer did he realize its potential.

His design seed acted like an internal auto designer in some ways. It accelerated his calculations, provided frequent heuristic shortcuts and strengthened his intuition for mech design.

While his design seed wasn't as capable as an auto designer, it didn't feel like an external aid. The design seed originally came from Ves, and it always possessed a strong connection to his mind.

Perhaps the best way to regard the design seed was that it carved out a significant portion of his Spirituality and specialized it towards mech design.

While the effects hadn't reached the potency of the auto designer he used, its reach was incredibly wide. It enhanced a lot more processes, some of which were very vague and esoteric.

No matter how closely he observed the workings of his design seed, Ves never believed he uncovered all of its depths.

Ves scratched his chin. "It's more than an internal auto designer."

Perhaps his upcoming visit to the MTA's sector headquarters might shed some light on this area. Ves doubted that the MTA was ignorant to the existence of the design seed, even if they could only observe its workings indirectly.

"No matter what exactly is going on here, there's no question that it's beneficial towards my manual design work!"

It was hard to estimate how much help it provided, but Ves roughly determined that his effective productivity practically doubled! He got twice as much work done than before he advanced!

All of his worries about not being able to complete his design in time faded away. The speed in which he shredded through various design problems astounded him again and again. It reminded him again of the instance where he designed the Ouroboros with the help of Axelar's auto designer.

A guess cropped up in his mind. "Perhaps.. the auto designer is modeled after the design seed."

This was a rather disconcerting implication. If his guess was right, someone wanted to imitate the functioning of a design seed!

The ultimate goal of developing the auto designer was to automate the work that high-ranking mech designers currently performed!

Although this goal posed a huge threat to his profession, Ves merely scoffed at the thought. With his deeper insight into how spirituality tied with mech design, no artificial system would ever be able to encapsulate the complete functions of a design seed.

For now, mech designers should be able to breathe easily.

He turned his attention back to the Transcendent Messenger and continued to build it up along the lines of his vision.

Ylvaine's spiritual fragment played a substantial role in guiding his design choices as well. It had grown increasingly smarter over time. Ves noted that while the fragment initially knew nothing about mechs, it gained a good understanding of what they represented after constantly observing Ves engaging in his work.

While it didn't assist him in improving his design work like his design seed, the fragment nonetheless offered occasional guidance on the look and feel of the mech.

The fragment played an especially substantial role when Ves completed the basic layout of exterior of his hero mech and began to add Ylvainan touches to its appearance.

"The Ylvainans love turning their mechs into moving bastions of faith."

That didn't mean they liked to turn their mechs into walking churches. Having engaged in this custom for several centuries, the Ylvainans managed to come up with various different ways to make their mechs express their faith.

For his hero mech, Ves decided to keep it relatively simple and went for a holy paladin look. The hero mechs he designed were meant to be ceremonial bodyguard mechs. They needed to look impressive and capable so that their presence deterred any trouble before it even started.

"They also need to be able to attract attention in a way that enhances the stature of Madame Cecily."

These were very complex priorities. However, together with Ylvaine's spiritual fragment, Ves managed to make the Transcendent Messenger look as if it carried a holy mission to protect its charge and spread Ylvaine's gospel at the same time.

"It truly looks like a holy warrior." Ves smiled in satisfaction.

He added a couple of distinctive visual flairs to the design. First, he draped a white tabard over the torso of the Transcendent Messenger. This was a purely cosmetic addition that strongly harkened back to the ancient knight orders of Old Earth.

The cloth consisted of a sophisticated composite material that was extremely resistant to dirt and routine wear and tear.

"Well, if it gets damaged somehow, it's not a big deal to replace it with another one." Ves shrugged.

Ves depicted a couple of sigils and heraldry on the front of the white tabard. The main sigil represented Prophet Ylvaine, while the heraldry stood for the Protectors of the Faith and Madame Cecily Curin.

After finishing the visual design, Ves took a step back and regarded its appearance. "I feel like I'm missing something here."

It came to him after a short moment of thought. "I forgot about the particle generator!"

Ves quickly fitted in the Rescue Particle Generator to the design. It was the only component license he made use of that he didn't borrow from the Ylvainans.

In order to enhance the holy quality of the Transcendent Messenger without overdoing it, Ves decided to place tiny modules all over the frame of the mech. From the bottom of its feet to the top of its head, the mech was riddled with tiny Rescue Particle Generators that hardly took up any space.

When activated, they surrounded the entire frame with glowing white particles that made it appear as if they were surrounded by an aura of pure holiness.

Together with the other aspects of its visual design, the Transcendent Messenger looked more resplendent in its expression of faith than the vast majority of Ylvainan mech designs in the market!

"It's practically a work of art!"