

Chapter 1211 Quiet Tension

With the help of his design seed, Ves managed to complete the first iteration of the Transcendent Messenger design in less than three months.

Ordinarily, Ves considered three months of design work to be a rush job. The Aurora Titan design required twice as much time.

Yet now that he advanced to Journeyman, he worked roughly twice as fast as before without any negative impact. While the Transcendent Messenger still needed to go through a couple of rounds of prototyping before Ves was ready to finalize the design, he at least had something to show after all of these months.

Both Ves and Ketis took a step back and admire the full-scale projection of their work. Although it only existed in a virtual form for now, the Transcendent Messenger already carried an air of power, aggression and faith!

"I really didn't think we'd get this far so fast." Ketis said while she idly petted Lucky who draped himself on her shoulders.

"Meow."

While Lucky's hard feelings towards Ves subsided a bit over the last couple of months, the cat still preferred to cuddle with Ketis!

The only times when Lucky drifted over to Ves was when he fed his pet exotics as snacks. Outside of that, the cat taunted Ves with a swish of his tail and drifted elsewhere!

Ves shook his head and ignored his traitorous pet. "It still lacks a lot of optimization though. Getting the internal architecture to work the way I wanted to took a lot more effort than I thought."

Designing a hero mech was never a simple task. Ves spent a lot of thought on how to balance the design. It needed to engage in both melee and ranged combat at the same time without unduly compromising them both.

He admittedly drew some inspiration from Lord Javier's Loquacious Raphael. As a custom high-quality hero mech, it bore the most resemblance to his Transcendent Messenger.

Although Ves looked down on blindly copying from someone else's design, he couldn't avoid getting inspired every now and then. Ves made sure to fully understand and put his own spin on anything he adopted from other influences.

Ketis continued to admire the form of their design. "You really have a thing for appearances, Ves. You're the only mech designer I know who invests so much in making your mechs look pretty."

"It's warranted this time." Ves retorted. "As a ceremonial bodyguard mech, appearances matter. The Ylvainans already have a fetish for turning their mechs into expressions of faith. Their customs are actually a lot more amenable to me than the functional style that is prevalent in other states."

To most mech designers, all of the extra cosmetic additions added to the maintenance burden of the mech without providing any concrete performance improvements.

Many mech designers didn't possess that much artistic ability anyway. Rather than invest so much time only to make their mechs look kitschy and the work of an amateur, they would rather stick to clean and functional forms.

It was different in states like the Ylvaine Protectorate. Every competent mech designer needed to invest in the visual design of their mechs in order to sell more mechs. Driven by profit and cultural norms, the Ylvainan mech industry became very developed in this area.

Ordinarily, this meant that Ves needed to meet very high standards to gain the approval of the local Ylvainans.

This stumbling block may have tripped many other foreign mech designers before, but Ves was a clear exception. He was not only accustomed to spending a lot of effort on the visual design of his mechs, but he also had the benefit of hosting an amplified remnant of Ylvaine's spirituality in his mind!

The spiritual fragment heavily influenced the artistic direction of the Transcendent Messenger. Ves still possessed a shallow understanding of the Ylvainan Faith. Much of the symbols and motifs the Ylvainans incorporated into their mech designs flew right over his head.

Having a piece of the founder of the Ylvainan Faith in his head neatly compensated for this shortcoming. In fact, Ylvaine's spiritual fragment was probably the most authoritative source on the faith in the Protectorate, and it happened to be fully at his disposal!

Of course, hosting a remnant of the prophet wasn't all that great. Its nagging expressions of approval and disapproval steered Ves into adjusting his behavior to conform to Ylvainan sensibilities.

"Before we fabricate the prototype, I should report back to the client." Ves stated. "I haven't met with Madame Cecily for a while."

"That woman..." Ketis began. "There's something about her that's.. odd. I get the feeling she's always hiding something from us. Aren't you supposed to be her business partner or something?"

Both of them had interacted with each other before. Only Ves was aware of Madame Cecily's true identity. For Ketis to sniff out something odd about Madame Cecily signified that her intuition was very sensitive in this area.

Ves ruefully smiled at her. "People like Madame Cecily are always more than they seem. We'd be fools to trust them at their word. The reason why I

partnered up with her is that we can both further our goals by banding together. She can gain a lot more from me by joining hands rather than stabbing me in the back."

"That doesn't sound like a very stable partnership."

"I disagree. A transactional relationship that is purely based on mutual benefits is probably more reliable than a relationship that is largely based on sentiment and trust. The latter will always be at risk whenever one side suffers from a mood swing or doesn't like the other side anymore."

Ketis frowned. "Is this what business relationships are supposed to look like?"

"Personal relationships are different from business relationships. A marriage involves very different dynamics from a business alliance. Don't confuse the two, Ketis. I'm not married to Madame Cecily. I'm a business partner of hers. Know the difference."

Ves decided they spent enough time gawking at their mech design. He shut down the projection and tidied up their workplace. The two mech designers along with Lucky exited the mech workshop and boarded their regular shuttle to travel back to the guest compound.

Just like before, a large escort of mechs from the Protectors of the Faith and the Avatars of Myth surrounded the armored shuttle. They had become a very common sight on the streets of Krent these past few months. So much so that the Protectors of the Faith feared that troublemakers might lay a trap on their route.

For this reason, the Protectors randomized the route each time, adding a bit more time to the daily commute. All of the detours lengthened their daily commute, but Ves bore with the necessity.

Ketis was less patient, however. "How much longer will martial law last? The Ylvainans still haven't found their stupid nutrient pack wrapper. The thief

probably sneaked out of the Kesseling System months ago. There's no point to locking down this place any further!"

"No Ylvainan wants to be the first person to propose a return to normality." Ves sighed. "The holy relic might not look like much, but it represents the great prophet of their faith. Even though it's common sense that martial law isn't doing anything useful at this point, the first person who stands up and suggests that they should lift martial law will be crucified by the rest!"

He didn't come up with this analysis on his own but learned it from Calabast during their period meetings.

Compared to when Ves first arrived on Kesseling VIII, the planet seemed utterly desolate now. Industries and many businesses had shuttered or went dormant due to the permanent imposition of martial law. While some of the restrictions had been relaxed, the very broad curfew times stifled any attempts to revive the planet's economy.

At this point, the Curin Dynasty basically bore the cost of allowing the theft to happen by covering the cost of emergency aid and supplies to the homebound citizens of Kesseling VIII.

While a lot of citizens still made do by working from home, not everyone found gainful employment.

Perhaps these restless, unemployed citizens would have rioted if they lived in a state like the Bright Republic or the Reinald Republic.

The local Ylvainans showed very little signs of discontent. Constant propaganda broadcasts and other measures strongly encouraged the locals to hold strong to their faith and pray for the return of their missing relic.

For these reasons, the city of Krent and the rest of Kesseling VIII remained remarkably calm throughout these tense couple of months.

Yet Ves strongly suspected that this was a false peace. Through Calabast, he learned that many different forces had converged on the planet.

The Kronon Dynasty diverted several mech regiments to the star system. Their spaceborn mech regiments tightly patrolled the inner system in order to stop any clandestine smugglers from conveying illegal cargo in and out of Kesseling VIII.

On the surface, the Protectors of the Faith heavily reinforced the city of Krent and a number of other strongholds on the planet.

The presence of all of these additional forces stifled the overall mood on Kesseling VIII despite being on the same side of the citizens.

While the Poxco Dynasty didn't bring in nearly as much assets and manpower to the Kesseling System, their impact was much more significant. Under the lead of High Inquisitor Xefin Lin Poxco, the Ylvainan Inquisition embarked on a grand mission to dig up all the dirty laundry they could find!

Ostensibly, they were merely following up on leads that might result in the recovery of the lost relic. In truth, the Poxcos simply wanted to mess up the many cozy business arrangements the Curins have made with all of the local companies!

The Curins took exception to the brazenness of the Attendants of Ylvaine. Rooting out corruption and shady business dealings didn't fall within the mandate of their inquisition!

The growing tension between the Curins and the Poxcos impacted Ves as well. Occasionally, an inquisitor subordinate to Xefin Lin Poxco paid a visit to him at the guest compound or at the mech workshop and had a 'friendly' chat with him. While they never had cause to suspect anything about him, he didn't appreciate their probes.

Still, as much as Ves disliked it, all of these concerns only encompassed the official authorities of the Protectorate.

More unscrupulous threats hid in the background. Both Leland and Calabast found signs that both the New Ylvaine Dynasty and intelligence operatives from the Star Faith Collective had smuggled their way onto the planet somehow.

The Ylvainan Inquisition even caught a handful of their agents!

Yet despite definite proof of their presence, the authorities made very little headway in tracking them down.

The bad actors spent a lot of effort to hide their cadre and core assets. For months, they played cat-and-mouse with the authorities as they continued to build up their strength while remaining out of the reach of the Protectors of the Faith and the Ylvainan Inquisition.

They were so effective at remaining out of reach that Ves guessed that traitors among the authorities may have had a hand in helping them hide.

Ves didn't know what was going on anymore. He was the only person who knew that the holy relic that everyone was searching for had long been disintegrated in Lucky's stomach.

To everyone else, they could only guess at the true state of the relic. This lingering ambiguity caused everyone to keep to themselves and refrain from making any drastic moves.

Still, something had to change.

Maybe one of the leading dynasties decided that drastic action was in order and took unilateral action.

Maybe someone would have the courage to stand up and state that the relic couldn't be found anymore.

Maybe the Ylvainans completely turned against foreigners and forced Ves to leave the Protectorate.

Ves didn't know how long it took for something to change, but he hoped to finish the commission and get out as soon as possible! He wanted no part of any trouble that was looming on the horizon!

Chapter 1212 Far-Fetched Dream

Ves smiled with pride as Calabast looked gobsmacked when he presented his design to her in her office.

The unsettling jamming field disrupted the functioning of the projector systems in her office. Yet the noise and haziness surrounding the three-dimensional depiction of the Transcendent Messenger only enhanced its divine air!

The first iteration of the design resembled a giant holy paladin with an anachronistic weapon loadout. Its powerful one-handed ballistic carbine packed a significant punch while its heavy saber was robust enough to chop through any chest armor without breaking!

The weapon loadout was the least remarkable aspect about the hero mech. Its symbolic and inspirational aspects hogged the entire limelight.

From its matte white tabard to its aura-like particle emissions, the mech imparted a strong impression of a holy warrior who would fight to the ends of the galaxy to uphold the faith!

After a minute of silence, Calabast finally regained her wits. "I have to admit, when you claimed you could design a mech that can impress the Ylvainans, I didn't expect you would come up with something like this. It's amazing what you've been able to accomplish in only three months."

"This is just the first iteration. It will only grow more perfect in the coming weeks as I'll test and perfect the design. If you think it already looks impressive so far, wait until you see the final product. It will definitely be

remarkable as my famous Aurora Titan design by the time I've added the final touch!" Ves confidently grinned.

While Ves invested much of his attention to his current design project, Gavin made sure to keep him up to speed with what was happening back at home.

The LMC and NORA Consolidated were selling Aurora Titans like hotcakes. Just when the analysts expected that demand had reached its peak, more and more customers came along and placed orders for the notoriously expensive mechs.

The high price tag for its editions had turned from a discouragement into a mark of exclusivity! Although sales continued to be hampered by critical reviews that magnify the many shortcomings of the Aurora Titan design, the super-medium space knight still managed to sustain its trend several months after its introduction!

Even the Ylvainans heard a lot of buzz about the Aurora Titan. If not for their aversion to foreign mechs and strong skepticism towards the feasibility of super-medium mechs, the Protectorate might have imported more than a dozen copies during this time!

Calabast performed a lot of internal deliberations. "Initially, I wasn't too hopeful about our chances of overturning the stagnant Ylvainan mech industry. I've changed my mind now that I see your mech design. Even though it's still an unfinished design, I can already say that its already remarkable enough to jolt the entire Ylvainan mech community!"

All of the praise only made Ves more smug. "I told you I can do it. When it comes to mech design, there's hardly any challenge that I can't overcome!"

"Whoa there kid, hold your horses. Don't count your chickens before they hatch. Failure is still very much on the table."

"Why do you keep calling me that? I'm almost thirty!" Ves whined.

"Ever since you pulled off that stupid stunt, you'll always be a kid to me, I'll stop calling you that when you actually grow up."

"You're not that much older than me, Calabast."

"Even if I'm not old enough to be your mother, I might as well be. I can't count the number of times I've been forced to wipe your butt."

"I don't mind if you keep doing that."

"Get your head out of the gutter, kid! This is no time for jokes! Just because you're on track to design a great mech doesn't mean we're in the clear!"

That caused Ves to frown. "What do you mean by that?"

"Just think about it. Who doesn't want you to succeed?"

"The traditionalists. The hardliners. The conservatives. The Poxcos."

Calabast nodded. "There is a lot of overlap between those groups you've mentioned. However, they are all united by their xenophobia and their dislike of foreign elements entering their sphere of influence. Now think of what we are doing. We are planning on opening up the Ylvainan mech market by showing that a foreigner like you can design a great Ylvainan mech. With how good your Transcendent Messenger design appears, our chances of success has risen considerably. Do you think the groups you've mentioned will let us go about our business?"

"Ah." Ves realized. "Can they do anything, though? You're the Director of Strategic Mech Management. You've got the backing of the highest elders of the Curin Dynasty. There's nothing they can do to stop me from completing the commission."

Calabast chuckled. "You're too naive, kid. With how much is at stake, do you truly believe the traditionalists can refrain themselves from playing dirty? This isn't the Bright Republic, Ves. While the mech designers of your state are

accustomed to fair competition, the Ylvaine Protectorate is not as stellar in that regard."

"This..."

While Ves always took this possibility into account, the months of inaction lulled him into complacency. Now that Ves came close to completing his design, the traditionalists probably wouldn't dismiss the threat of a foreigner who might very well be capable of out-Ylvaining the Ylvainan mech designers!

"It depends on whether the traditionalists and extremists are informed of how remarkable your design has become." Calabast stated with a frown. "With how many Protectors of the Faith are surrounding you every day, you can bet the traditionalists have definitely been warned. I've been working hard to keep the security systems of your mech workshop secure, but it's hard to hide the quality of your design once you fabricate your prototypes."

To Calabast, it was easier for her to hide the design when it merely existed as virtual collection of files and documents.

It was a different story when it came to physical mechs. They were so large and imposing that it was nearly impossible to keep them out of sight from any snooping eyes.

Ves frowned. "I can't finish my design without gathering lots of data on how the prototypes perform in realspace tests. I need an extensive testing ground that can showcase both the ranged and melee capabilities of my prototypes."

"Is it possible for you to skip this step?" She requested. "Testing grounds are often large spaces that are very difficult to secure entirely. Even the huge, enclosed facilities can't block every observation method."

"No. Absolutely not. As a mech designer, I'll bear the blame for any major problems emerges as a result of insufficient realspace testing. I've already

performed quite a bit of simulations but they will never be able to model the Transcendent Messenger accurately."

She sighed. Calabast knew that Ves was very stubborn when it came to mech design. "Alright. I'll look for a suitable testing ground that's private and remote enough to minimize the chance of leaks. However, you'll have to take into account that any testing ground that meets my criteria will likely be far away from Krent."

"No problem. I don't mind a longer excursion."

They moved on to some matters. While their partnership hadn't gotten off to a good start, enough time had passed for them to become accustomed to each other.

At the very least, Ves made peace with the fact that Calabast would butt her head into his business every now and then. At the same time, Calabast became familiar with his traits and his priorities.

"Can I ask you something?"

"What is it, kid?"

"I've been thinking about what you said during our initial meeting. When I asked you what you want out of our partnership, you said you wanted to achieve greatness."

"That's right." She nodded. "That hasn't changed."

"There are many ways for someone to achieve greatness. They can become the ultimate authority of a state. They can promote to an admiral in the CFA. They can advance until they become a god pilot of Star Designer. What I'm wondering is what kind of greatness you're pursuing. Where do your ambitions end?"

Calabast chuckled. "It's still too soon to set my ambitions. However, I don't mind sharing one of my dreams. If you think what the fabled Metal Scroll represents, it's a ticket to climb to the very apex of human civilization. To you, your ultimate ambition is to become a Star Designer, right? I don't have an affinity in mech design nor do I have the aptitude to pilot mechs."

"Most people in the galaxy aren't involved in the mech community. Just because you don't work with mechs doesn't mean you're invisible."

"True. My dream is therefore a lot more fanciful than you think. With how large and all-encompassing human civilization has grown, I don't dare set this dream as my ambition. It's simply too difficult to fulfill even if I'm riding a Holy Son to the top."

"Don't tease me, Calabast. Can you tell me your dream?"

The spy crossed her arms and smirked. "Do you really want to hear it? Very well. My dream is to become the galactic empress."

"...What?"

"You heard that right. I want to become the ultimate ruler of the galaxy! I want to be the head of a sweeping empire that encompasses the entire known galaxy. Hundreds of thousands of light-years all fall within in my rule! Even the first-rate superstates and the Big Two have to bow their heads to me! The aliens that have surrendered to me will also submit to my rule!"

What a wild dream! Forget about uniting human space into a single galactic nation, Calabast wasn't content with that and wanted to subjugate every alien civilization as well!

"And I thought my ambition is hard to fulfill." Ves muttered with wide eyes.

"Don't take it seriously. It's just a fantasy to keep me entertained in my dreams. I know that even Holy Sons aren't capable of uniting humanity and

subjugating the entire galaxy. I don't even know if I really want to be the head of such a humongous galactic empire in the first place. It's much more practical for me to be the power behind the throne."

"That fits much better with who you are."

"You have no idea who I really am." Calabast shook her head. "You only know me as an intelligence operative. While this is a large part of who I am, there is more to life than my job."

Ves always had the notion that she possessed a sophisticated identity. If she was a Vesian, then she would certainly be a noble!

"When will I get to hear your background?"

"Not now. My actual identity is very complicated. It doesn't really matter, anyway. For now, my cover identity as Madame Cecily Curin is my new life. Unless the entire Protectorate is upended one day, I won't return to my old life."

"So you've completely cut yourself from your past?"

"I wouldn't go that far." Calabast sardonically. "I still make use of my connections. It's impossible for me to completely divorce myself from my past. Take it from me, Ves. No matter how far you run, you'll never be able to escape your roots."

That sounded rather ominous. Ylvaine's spiritual fragment even pulsed in his mind. It seemed to think that Calabast was making a prediction.

Ves gently suppressed the nosy spiritual fragment. "Well, whatever is going on, I hope it doesn't affect me and my business."

"That's difficult to say. My association with you is highly unusual. For what reason would I want to enter into a close business relationship with a random

Brighter mech designer? I've already been deflecting a lot of investigations from my personal rivals."

"Do I have to pay attention to my surroundings?" Ves asked.

"I'm already handling it. You should probably pay more attention to threats closer to home and on this planet. The Ylvainan traditionalists will definitely make a move at some point."

That was rue. Ves began to frown as he thought of what the traditionalists might do in response to the threat he posed to their political agenda.

Chapter 1213 Remarkable Observations

Ves stepped out of the shuttle in a massive underground parking hall. He looked around and saw a considerable amount of mechs from Protectors of the Faith moving to secure the entire site.

A specialized mech transport had already arrived at the parking hall. The cargo hatch opened up, allowing a very distinctive mech to be lifted out of the vessel.

Almost every staff member or Protector paused for a bit.

This was the first time they saw the prototype of the Transcendent Messenger!

Although the mech hadn't donned its tabard or activate Rescue Particle Generator modules integrated in its frame, the mech already looked unusual.

Even when Ves hadn't infused his design with a design spirit yet, just the fact that he poured months of work into it already imparted it with a primitive spiritual quality.

This phenomenon signified that even if mech designers didn't employ the same methods as Ves, they could still infuse their designs with their spiritual energy.

He found out that he didn't even need to focus too much on his work for this process to happen, because the design seed was already single-mindedly focused on mech design!

He made a very important conclusion after he observed this phenomenon. Journeymen were able to alter the performance of their designs unconsciously with their design seeds!

It was an automatic process that did not require a mech designer's awareness or control to take place!

When Ves recalled all the mech designs he witnessed and all the lessons he learned so far, he made another guess.

The improvements the design seed made to his mech design didn't necessarily have to do anything with the X-Factor. While his own design seed seemed to channel all of its efforts into improving the X-Factor of his mechs, that was only because of his design philosophy.

If Ketis ever advanced to Journeyman, it was likely that her design seed would expend all of its effort on improving the sharpness of the weapons carried by her mechs.

Ves already observed that the Aurora Titan's internal architecture contained a lot of abstruse parts that didn't entirely conform to reality. As a Senior, Professor Ventag's design seed was definitely stronger than that of a Journeyman, so its effects were significantly stronger.

This meant that as a mech designer advanced, the phenomenon became stronger!

Ves suspected that this was one of the key functions of design seeds.

He already theorized that high-ranking mech designers imparted their mechs with extraordinary qualities. Now, he personally experienced this phenomenon

in his own work, proving that mechs designed by high-ranking mech designers were simply better if everything else was equal.

No wonder mechs designed by high-ranking mech designers captured the bulk of market share in every mech market. The only advantage that mechs designed by Apprentices and lower brought was that they were more affordable.

What this meant right now was that even if Ves hadn't done anything special to the prototype, the mech already possessed a weak X-Factor by itself.

What made the mech more remarkable was that while Ves provided the bulk of its spiritual quality, a small portion happened to carry the spiritual imprint of Ylvaine's spiritual fragment!

Ves designed the Transcendent Messenger in full view of the fragment. On its part, the fragment learned that the design would be its first home.

How could it not be emotionally invested in the design?

For this reason, the design already carried a hint of what Ves had in store. This was reflected in the prototype which already possessed a faint shadow of absolute faith!

This effect fell flat on Ves. He didn't believe in the Ylvainan Faith. He also hosted a spiritual fragment of the prophet in his mind all the time, so he was already numb to its sacred aura.

Yet to the Ylvainans around him, the prototype seemingly touched their hearts in an indescribable manner. The early iteration of the Transcendent Messenger was like a beacon that glowed in the dark. No other mech aside from the prototype ever came close to the perfect mech in their thoughts!

Ves grimaced a bit as the Ylvainans kept staring at the mech as heavy-duty lifters slowly brought it deeper into the underground facility.

"Why so glum, Ves?" Ketis said as she stood next to him while idly petting Lucky's back. "You wanted the Ylvainans to gawk at our mech, right? Looks like we did a good job!"

"I'm not sad about that." Ves replied. "I'm just concerned of what might happen by revealing our prototype to so many Ylvainans. I really don't want the details of our mech to be leaked ahead of time. Even if Calabast promised that the Protectors of the Faith are all loyal and that this subterranean testing ground is one of the most secure places on the planet, I'm still afraid that some traditionalist sympathiser will spill the beans."

He wanted the Transcendent Messenger to debut on his terms. The longer its design remained confidential, the lower the chance that some nefarious organization decided that it was time to do something drastic.

As the prototype left the parking hall, Ves, Ketis, Lucky and their bodyguards moved into the facility as well.

The subterranean testing ground offered expansive obstacle courses and damage-resistant dummies to test the capabilities of a mech. Because it all took place deep below the surface of the planet, it was difficult for spies and spy bugs to infiltrate the facility.

This was a testing ground that excelled in maintaining secrecy. Its security suite was constantly being updated by a dedicated team of virtual security experts. Its staff were all Curin loyalists who had been vetted since the moment they were born.

For Calabast to recommend that Ves test his prototype in this facility said much about its ability to keep a secret.

Ves met with the director of the testing ground and had a perfunctory chat with the fellow. He expected a cold response due to his foreign roots, but the director was very enthusiastic about the prototype.

"I can already tell your mech will perform admirably, Mr. Larkinson! This is a mech that will spark a revolution in the Protectorate!"

"Thank you for the compliment, but the Transcendent Messenger design is nowhere near completion. Let us not be too hasty in our judgement." Ves responded with a strained smile.

Even before the prototype showed off its capabilities, it already managed to charm some of the Ylvainans! The design touched their faith in a way that no other Ylvainan mech had accomplished before!

After some technicians performed a cursory inspection of the prototype, it was ready to be activated for the first time.

Ves and Ketis moved down to the prep area where the test pilot readied himself for this pivotal moment.

While the testing ground offered many skilled test pilots, none of them possessed the ability to pilot a hero mech proficiently. For this reason, Ves requested Calabast to put one of her elite bodyguard mech pilots forward as a volunteer.

Test pilots normally required special training in order to bring out the most out of a newly-developed mech.

They had to be trained to recognize many danger signs as they often piloted flawed and unpolished mechs. Major weak points and fatal flaws posed a very realistic risk to mech pilots who piloted early prototypes.

For this reason, many test pilots also studied the fundamentals of mech design. With this knowledge, they gained a basic understanding of the functioning of mechs and the many ways it could fail.

Aside from that, test pilots also needed to be capable of piloting a wide variety of mechs. Even if a test pilot only piloted knight mechs, this type came in so

many different shapes and sizes that normal mech pilots wouldn't be able to adapt to them as fast.

Because the live tests needed to be performed quickly, test pilots didn't have the time to familiarize themselves with the prototypes. As a result, they developed the ability to become proficient with any new mech they came in touch with. No matter how steep the learning curve of a new mech, as long as it wasn't completely unreasonable, test pilots always manage to perform decently during the tests.

Yet for all of their adaptability, a hero mech was a very different beast. Only the elites among mech pilots had a chance of piloting this mech type proficiently. All lesser mech pilots could forget about making a hero mech soar!

Ves called as he stepped close to the young, bald mech pilot's side. "Are you prepared to pilot the prototype?"

Taon Melin solemnly nodded. "I did my homework. I've studied the documentation you passed me and memorized the essentials. To be honest, I didn't think you'd be able to design an Ylvainan mech. We've heard great things about your Aurora Titan model, but none of us believe a non-believer like you can understand our faith, but now..."

The Kronon mech pilot fell silent. Standing so close to the prototype allowed him to experience its remarkable nature up close. Although it only carried a weak X-Factor, it nonetheless synced with his faith!

Ves observed the reactions of many Ylvainans to the prototype. In particular, the Kronons were more impacted by the mech than the Curins!

He guessed that those that seem more devout and dedicated to their faith reacted stronger to the Transcendent Messenger than others. Although Taon

Melin followed a different interpretation of the Ylvainan Faith, Ves had no doubt that the Kronon elite was very pious about his beliefs!

"I'm glad you like the mech." Ves eventually replied. "If you ask me, the Ylvainans focus too much on the origin of the mech designer and not enough on their capabilities. For example, does a mech designer need to be an excellent marksman to design a good rifleman mech? Not necessarily. The familiarity helps, but it's not the only factor that makes a mech fit for a specific purpose."

Someone like Ketis possessed an advantage in designing sword-wielding mechs, but Ves could still design something better due to his superior skills.

"What is the Transcendent Messenger based upon?" Taon asked while keeping his eyes fixated on the mech.

"The name of the mech already makes it clear that it's inspired by your prophet. My intention is to make every mech pilot feel as if they embody the prophet's faith and virtues if they pilot this mech. If you are devoted to the faith and worship the prophet, you will find that piloting this mech is very rewarding."

That was all Ves could afford to say about the mech's X-Factor. He kept his words vague enough to put Taon on the right path without revealing any of his trade secrets.

Ves left Taon to his mental preparations after issuing some practical advice on how to pilot the mech. The Transcendent Messenger was a mech that needed to fight in a certain way to make the most out of its capabilities.

Fortunately, Taon hadn't lied and read all of the documentation that Ves provided to the mech pilot.

"Alright, Melin!" A chief technician yelled after stepping away from the mech he inspected. "It's time!"

"Understood. I'm on my way."

The mech pilot lifted up to the cockpit and hopped inside. As the cockpit closed and the mech technicians distanced from the machine, they waited with bated breath for its activation.

"It's coming online!"

Ves moved over to a nearby control panel and read the telemetry of the mech.

The readings all fell within his tolerance. The mech he fabricated at the mech workshop booted up flawlessly!

The eyes of the mech glowed like white suns as other lights came online as well. Each of these were indicators that the prototype of the Transcendent Messenger had truly come to life for the very first time!

"What a mech!"

Every Ylvainan in the prep area couldn't help but be impressed by the mech yet again. Even though it only just came online, its aura of absolute faith had already grown sharper!

Chapter 1214 Knife and Fork

The difference was rather subtle, but the aura of the prototype definitely shifted when Taon Melin interfaced with it for the first time.

According to his theories on the X-Factor, Ves believed this was because of a strong compatibility between the mech and mech pilot.

Because the X-Factor of the Transcendent Messenger was unusually pure and one-dimensional, the changes a mech pilot introduced to the X-Factor became very obvious.

To Ves, it seemed that Taon Melin's intensity carried over to the mech through the man-machine connection.

It was like a drop of color fell into a clear glass of water. The edge added to the hero mech's X-Factor was a combination of both the mech and mech pilot.

As the newly-activated prototype proceeded to perform basic actions to test the integrity and range of motion of its frame, Ves thought of the implications of his latest observation.

Normally, mech pilots didn't exhibit a lot of focus. They contributed very little to the expression of X-Factor to their mechs.

In contrast, both the mech and mech designers exhibited very strong spirituality together.

For this reason, Ves always considered his mech designs as a means to impose their X-Factor to their mech pilots.

The theory he developed so far was that mech pilots needed to conform to the values and principles embedded that Ves had imparted to the mech through its X-Factor. The greater the resemblance, the greater the expression of X-Factor.

A calm and methodical mech pilot wouldn't gain much benefit out of a mech with an aggressive and impulsive X-Factor.

The differences were so great that the opposite of synergy might happen. The mech and mech pilot might fight against each other, thereby impacting the machine's effective performance!

If the mech and mech pilot were completely in sync, then the best result would happen. At least, that was what Ves always believed.

Now, he wasn't so sure anymore. As Ves discreetly activated his spiritual vision and observed the changes in the X-Factor of the prototype, he became fascinated by the possibilities it opened up in his mind.

Taon Melin's influence on the X-Factor of the prototype was miniscule due to his dull and negligible spirituality.

Yet what if the mech pilot was stronger? What if he was an expert candidate or expert pilot? With greater spiritual strength, the mech pilot earned a right to have a say in the expression of X-Factor!

This realization meant that Ves was able to achieve different effects with his mech designs as long as they are piloted by higher-ranking mech pilots.

Each X-Factor would mutate and take on a different emphasis depending on the traits of the individual mech pilot. As a result, each individual mech diverged from the template of their design and became something novel and unique!

"Total compatibility isn't the only solution." Ves whispered to himself.

He long believed that the X-Factor would only be able to reach its full potential if there was a hundred percent sync between a mech, mech pilot and mech designer.

The complete resonance he witnessed beforehand in Eloise Pelican's mind strengthened his belief in this theory.

If Ves could design a mech that managed to achieve unity between man and machine, then he would feel an unprecedented amount of satisfaction!

Yet what if there wasn't a perfect sync? What if the beliefs and principles of the mech, mech pilot and mech designer differed a little bit?

A different form of resonance might occur, one based on synergy rather than unity.

Ves came up with a very bold speculation. If the mech, mech pilot and mech designer all amplified each other's strengths, something even more powerful than complete resonance might occur!

Yet even if synergistic resonance or whatever he decided to call it didn't exist, just the changes the mech pilots brought to the X-Factor opened plenty of new doors to Ves. Now that he knew that an effect like this existed, he could experiment with it and see what benefits it brought when he designed an expert mech in the future.

Overall, the main lesson he learned today was that there were multiple roads to greatness!

The next couple of days hit this lesson home to Ves. The prototype tackled the tests while radiating an aura that blended absolute faith with a quality that Ves best described as zeal.

Taon Melin was a mech pilot that not only exhibited strong faith, but also became very enthusiastic at the prospect of spreading it through his piloting.

"Looks like he's a close fit to the virtue of zeal."

For his current design project, Ves didn't plan to delve into this matter any further. Once Ylvaine's spiritual fragment became the design spirit of the Transcendent Messenger, the spirituality of the mech would definitely minimize the influence the elite Kronon mech pilots exerted on the X-Factor.

In the face of such a wide disparity of spiritual strength, the differences didn't matter. It was best for Ves to aim for compatibility rather than synergy.

"The Transcendent Messenger is designed to embody the different aspects of Prophet Ylvaine's faith. The mech pilot plays the role of a willing vessel in this dynamic."

Right now, Taon became more and more accustomed to the nuances of the prototype. His hesitation lessened and his decisiveness grew stronger. He piloted the mech with confidence through various tests.

From shooting projected dummy targets with its ballistic carbine to sparring against a practice mech with its heavy saber, the Transcendent Messenger fought with zeal and enthusiasm under Taon's control!

"What an inspiring mech." The director of the testing ground sighed. "I've seen a lot of Ylvainan mechs over the years. Some have come close to looking as impressive as your mech, but it truly surprises me that a foreigner is able to accomplish this much. What's the secret?"

Ves smiled politely as he kept an eye on the telemetry readings of the mech. "It's simple. I'm simply good at designing mechs that leave a powerful impression on people. This is one of the reasons why Madame Cecily Curin commissioned me to design her ceremonial bodyguard mechs."

"Yet you are not a worshipper of the Ylvainan Faith. How can you possibly design a mech that appears to be more devout than our homegrown mech designers?"

"While I'm not a believer, I've taken the time to learn about your faith. I have dived into the scriptures of your faith and familiarized myself with its central beliefs. I have gained a strong respect for your faith and carried that over in my work."

The director frowned at the hidden implication in that response. "It is rather odd that your respect is stronger than our earnest belief in our faith."

"I don't mean to belittle the devoutness of your Ylvainan mech designers. Besides, according to the tenets of your faith, everyone is an Ylvainan, right? No matter if someone is an atheist or an adherent to another faith, we are all destined to be reunited as brothers and sisters during the Time of Ascension. The citizens of the Protectorate seem to be obsessed with drawing a line between themselves and foreigners, but is this truly Ylvaine's will?"

What Ves just said put the director and any eavesdropping Ylvainan into an introspective mood.

In the Bright Republic, Ves grew up in a culture that believed in the ideals of the state but also opened their doors to others as long as they weren't Vesians. While many of their neighboring states were weirdos, they nonetheless learned to be a little tolerant if they wanted to conduct business with their closest trading partners.

When Ves visited the Reinald Republic for the first time, he experienced what it was like to live in a state that took their openness and tolerance to foreigners to an extreme. The Reinaldians gleefully attracted as many tourists and visitors as possible in order to milk them of their money.

In contrast to those states who fully integrated into the galactic community, the Ylvaine Protectorate maintained the opposite. They closed their borders and restricted the movement of trade goods and people.

They had a good reason to do so, at first. At the founding of the state, the Ylvainans were defeated refugees who suffered enormously at the hands of non-believers. They needed some time to recover and heal their wounds.

Yet even after they recovered, the Ylvainans became so used to isolating themselves from the rest of the star sector that they continued to close themselves off.

The central struggle between reformers and traditionalists centered around what was best for the Protectorate.

Should the Ylvaine Protectorate stick to their old ways and risk getting further behind on the prevailing trends?

Should the state welcome foreign influences at the risk of diluting their religious fervor?

The reformers believed the latter served the Ylvainans best.

The director of the testing ground worked for the Curin Dynasty, so he ought to believe in the same ideals.

Yet he still looked uneasy at the prospect that Ves might overshadow their domestic mech designers.

"If respect is enough to express our faith, what is the point of being devout?" He asked with doubt.

"I think Prophet Ylvaine once stated that faith is not a competition." Ves spoke, referring to one of his sayings recorded into scripture. "We are all connected regardless of our beliefs. The rewards of being devout are not immediate and will only be given later."

The spiritual fragment in his mind pulsed in approval.

The prophet had been rather tolerant of other faiths early on. Though he made sure to claim that they all fell under his own in the end, he never compelled someone to convert to his faith. That the Ylvainans grew more intolerant to non-believers was an inevitable development that resulted from the faith's explosive growth.

"There is still value in belief. Perhaps this isn't necessary reflected to mechs."

"This is due to their primary function." Ves replied. "Mechs are designed to fight. They are first and foremost war machines. They aren't meant to be altars of faith. This is one of the reasons why most mechs look flat and generic despite how many references to the faith your domestic mech designers have embedded into their designs. If you want to inspire the faithful and convert the unenlightened, then you're better off building a church rather than a mech."

Ketis spoke up from the side. "I don't agree, Ves. Mechs can certainly convert a lot of people into believers. I've seen it happen plenty of times in.. where I used to live. I've witnessed cases where mechs piloted by cultists invade a settlement and force the villagers to convert to their beliefs at gunpoint. Let me tell you, when there's a huge mech pointing its enormous rifle at your body, you'll be begging and crying to convert!"

"How uncivilized!" The director became aghast. "We would never do something like that?"

"Really?"

She was right to be skeptical. From what Ves read of the history of the Ylvainan Faith, the believers used to be quite militant in spreading their beliefs. They grew more and more violent and unrestrained in their attempts to increase the reach of their faith.

This was also why the states affected by this growing threat moved quickly and decisively to assassinate Prophet Ylvaine and wipe out his entire dynasty.

Of course, Ves would never mention this out aloud. The Attendants of Ylvaine made sure to erase this part of the history of their faith.

"I think the greater point here is that mechs are tools that are inclined towards specific usages." Ves said in an attempt to blunt what Ketis had said. "When you cut a steak, you have better luck using a knife than a fork. While it's still possible to cut a steak with a fork, it's not the best application for this tool."

"That is unless you press your fork onto the neck of someone who holds a knife." Ketis said. "You can threaten the other person to cut the steak for you or simply take the knife for yourself."

That left both Ves and the director speechless.

Chapter 1215 Stress Tests

The tests largely proceeded without too many surprises. Aside from shocking the Ylvainans with its X-Factor, the prototype of the Transcendent Messenger showed no significant deviations in its realspace performance. All of the readings matched the parameters obtained from the simulations that Ves performed beforehand.

This outcome didn't surprise him very much. Working on the Aurora Titan design taught him that the discrepancies between simulated tests and realspace tests mostly came down to the inability for the former to model metaphysical phenomena.

Even if Professor Ventag's developed his own mathematical models to take his specialty into account, the actual influence of his design philosophy couldn't entirely be quantified.

Therefore, it became necessary for mech designers to fabricate a prototype and test its actual performance in the field.

This particular problem didn't haunt Ves as much because his design philosophy primarily affected the mech pilot instead of the mech.

With how much care and effort he spent on designing his mech, he already optimized the mech to a fair degree. The chance of any mistakes or major deviations cropping up was very low.

The Transcendent Messenger design shouldn't exhibit any major discrepancies when it came to its technical performance for this reason.

Any mistakes that the tests uncovered was a mark of failure and carelessness on his part.

The only real wildcard was design philosophy, but even then its influence didn't alter the parameters of the mech.

Perhaps if Ketis advanced in the future, that might change, but for now the hero mech performed almost exactly as he expected.

Taon Melin brilliantly showcased both the ranged and melee capabilities of the mech. He earned a lot of respect from the other Ylvainans for his comprehensive mech piloting skills.

Elites were truly a different breed of mech pilots!

The data he gathered so far indicated that Ves didn't have to make too many adjustments to complete the next iteration of the design. If all went well, then Ves would be able to move on to the production phase of the commission after completing tests on the second or third prototype.

While that still felt a bit too hasty to Ves, he didn't have the luxury of time on his side. He needed to get a move on to wrap up the commission quickly to gain the MTA's recognition.

The Ylvaine Protectorate was just a foreign market to Ves. He did not intend to stay here any longer than he had to in order to further his business interests. Once he dazzled the Ylvainans with his mech design, he intended to pack up his bags and return home as fast as the Barracuda could carry him away!

Near the end of the testing period, the prototype underwent increasingly more arduous stress tests. It always hurt Ves to see a mech getting abused or pushed over its limits, but this was a necessary process to see how much strain the mech could withstand.

During a test where Taon piloted the prototype into dodging live projectiles shot by automated turrets, Lucky suddenly meowed in alarm and rose up from Ketis' grasp.

"Meow! Meow!"

"What is it, Lucky?"

"Meow!"

"Incoming threats?"

The director standing next to Ves looked at the meowing cat and frowned.

"What is the matter, Mr. Larkinson?"

"My pet believes that this facility is about to come under attack! You should sound the alarm and warn the Protectors of the Faith!"

"Let us not be hasty." The director replied with skepticism. He moved to a console and referenced some figures. "According to our perimeter sensors, there aren't any threats in the vicinity."

The director didn't believe that Lucky possessed the ability to detect danger! Ves outright ignored the director and turned to Ketis.

"Suit up. There's trouble on the way."

"Alright." Ketis seriously nodded. "You two there! Go hand us our suitcases!"

While most of the guards and the testing ground staff looked perplexed, Ves and Ketis calmly received their custom suits of armor from their bodyguards and unfolded it to encompass their entire bodies.

Once Ves donned his Sparous Vize and Ketis adorned her Rising Red Dragon, they turned from mild and friendly mech designers into dangerous-looking warriors!

While the director and the other civilians still remained confused, the Protectors of the Faith weren't as complacent. Regardless of whether they could trust a mechanical cat to detect danger, it was better to be safe and sorry.

One of the Protector officers in the control room stepped up to the director.
"Suspend the test and put the facility on high alert. Please pay attention to the perimeter sensors and perform a remote sweep of the entire site."

"I can stop the testing of this prototype but there are more mechs being tested at the moment! I can't suspend all of those tests! That will delay the completion of our contracted obligations and force us to incur a significant penalty fee for each mech that is returned late!"

As the director and the Protector officer argued with each other, Ves readied his Silent Repose while Ketis activated her Udor. Both of their pistols formed very stark contrast, but each enhanced their dangerous air.

"Meow!"

"According to Lucky, this facility is about to get breached! There are several tunneling machines that have come close to boring through the walls!"

"What?" The director frowned. "But that's impossible! According to all of the seismic sensors, absolutely nothing has come close to racking up a disturbance!"

"Check if those sensors are reliable. They might have been compromised!"

Although the director still didn't look convinced, he ordered some specialists to double-check the seismic sensor system.

After a minute of digging, one of the specialists noticed something fishy.

"Director! The output of the seismic sensors doesn't make any sense! Their readings are slightly off compared to how they should be after their latest calibrations!"

"What does that mean?"

"It means the readings from our seismic sensors are fake! This isn't supposed to happen! We last inspected the readings three hours ago, and they should have been completely fine at the time!"

A realization dawned upon the director. "Our monitoring system has been tampered with! More systems may be compromised!"

The specialists and security experts attempted to reverse the tampering. They succeeded after reverting the software to an older backup that had been kept in isolation. This process took three minutes despite their best efforts.

As soon as the newly-rebooted seismic sensors began to capture any tremors transmitted from the surrounding soil, they immediately spiked!

"The seismic sensors have detected six distinct tunneling machines within range! All of them are very close and close to breaching the walls!"

The director widened his eyes in fright. "Sound the alarm! Suspend all the tests! Inform the Protectors of the Faith and follow the evacuation plan!"

"Too late." Someone said.

All the lights in the control room flickered off. The consoles and projections all shut off as well, causing the entire area to descend into darkness!

Almost immediately after the lights went out, someone opened fire!

BANG!

"The director has been shot!"

More gunfire sounded out as the Protectors of the Faith immediately killed the assailant, which turned out to be one of the specialists!

Torchlights mounted onto the armor of the Protectors flickered to life, casting strong directional lights throughout the entire control room. The Protectors

immediately swept over everyone in order to determine whether they were armed.

Ves looked to his side to see that the director had been shot in the head. There was no way he survived.

"A pity. He was very friendly."

Although sabotage cut off power to the control room, the frightened staffers quickly managed to engage the backup power system. As soon as their consoles came back to life, they connected to the other parts of the facility in order to see if anything happened.

"We've been breached!" Someone yelled. "Enemy mechs are pouring in from the tunnels! Over twenty mechs have entered so far and more are pouring out!"

Ves grew alarmed when he heard that. Only a single mech company guarded the subterranean testing ground! He hadn't been able to bring along the Avatars of Myth this time, so he was entirely reliant on the Ylvainans to defend himself against enemy mechs.

He moved closer to a projection of one of the feeds. "Do we know who these mechs belong to?"

"That's the old emblem of the Ylvaine Dynasty! It's the True Believers!"

True Believers! Ves inwardly cursed when he heard that. Whether they were imposters or the real deal, anyone who claimed to be a part of the New Ylvaine Dynasty almost always acted like suicidal fanatics!

The enemy mechs continued to pour out of the tunnels and immediately fought against the Protectors of the Faith.

While the Protectors put up a good fight, the attackers had the initiative on their side! The True Believers largely caught the Protectors of the Faith off-guard.

"Our Protector mechs are being repelled!"

The tunneling machines all breached close together so that their mechs didn't have to cross a lot of distance to back each other up. They quickly formed into squads that turned them into tough opponents to defeat.

In contrast, the mechs of the Protectors of the Faith had spread themselves across the entire underground facility. This was so that at least one mech could respond to any emergency anywhere in the facility as fast as possible.

If external threats did arrive for someone reason, the Protector mechs would at least be able to reposition themselves after receiving advance warning from the seismic sensors.

Sadly, the defenders hadn't detected the intrusion until it was too late! Even though the Protector mechs were desperately trying to form into squads of their own, the mechs stationed at the parking hall had all been overwhelmed by the ferocious attack of the newcomers!

"Ylvaine lives!"

"The great prophet has made a decree!"

"We must end the travesty that is taking place here!"

The mechs openly transmitted the words of their mech pilots. Even as the mech pilots verbally advanced their agenda, they began to breach through the various obstacles in their way.

The enemy mechs intruded further into the subterranean testing ground!

As the enemy mechs moved towards the core of the facility, Ves wondered if they were attempting to kill or kidnap him. The route the True Believers were taking would put them very close to the control room!

Ves gripped his ballistic pistol tighter with his armored hand. If a mech actually came close to breaching the control room, then he didn't stand a chance unless he pulled out the Amastendira.

However, even the Amastendira couldn't take out every enemy mech!

As Ves wondered if he needed to take Ketis and Lucky and sneak away under the cover of stealth, the vanguard of the True Believer mechs made a small detour. Their direction didn't take them to the control room anymore.

Instead, they were heading towards the testing chamber which held the prototype of the Transcendent Messenger!

Faster than Ves expected, the mechs barged through the gates of the testing chambers and immediately began to fight his prototype!

"What are the True Believers up to?" Ketis worriedly asked. "Why are they fighting against the prototype?"

"I don't know, but the prototype has already gone through several intensive stress tests! Its armor coverage is damaged and compromised and its energy reserves are almost empty!" Ves stated with alarm.

The enemy mechs seemed to know that and tried to corral and pressure the prototype. Despite Taon's best effort, the elite mech pilot couldn't do anything when he was being mobbed by the twenty mechs that had poured into the testing chamber in quick succession!

Even before its energy cells ran out of juice, the True Believer mechs managed to mob and tear away the weapons wielded by the prototype!

The mech had been completely neutralized!

What happened next astounded Ves even further. Once the True Believers pinned the prototype down, they forced Taon exit the mech!

Even though the armor of the prototype was very tough, it wouldn't last very long against the focused attacks of more than a dozen mechs!

As soon as Taon evacuated from his mech, the True Believers no longer bothered with him and instead lifted the prototype and brought it out of the testing chamber.

It was only at this point that Ves, the staff and the Protectors of the Faith realized what the True Believers were after.

"They're stealing our prototype!" Ketis gasped. "How dare they?!"

Chapter 1216 Perplexing Motives

"The True Believers sacrificed twenty-three mechs and two tunneling machines just to capture my prototype?" Ves asked with disbelief.

The Protector officer assigned to question him nodded from his open-faced helmet. "We managed to capture some of the mech pilots alive. We're interrogating them right at this instant and we will know more at the end of the day."

This had been an awful day for Ves. Just when the prototype nearly completed all of the tests, the New Ylvaine Dynasty launched a sudden, perplexing attack on the subterranean testing ground.

Wasn't this facility supposed to be secure? Hadn't all the personnel been vetted all the time? How could the Protectors of the Faith allow the True Believer to take over his prototype and successfully make off with their spoils?

"It's clear that the operation is premeditated and targeted." The Protector explained. "Their only goal was to obtain your mech prototype for reasons that isn't clear to us. When they initially tunneled into this facility, we assumed they were targeting you. We deployed our mechs and other defenses around the

control room you were in and bunkered down to meet the oncoming intruders."

"And then the True Believers suddenly turned to the testing chambers and absconded with my prototype." Ves summed up what happened next.

"Our forces harried their rear as they attempted to make off with your prototype, but they prioritized its retrieval above everything else. Their rearguard constantly entangled our pursuit force and fought without regard for their lives in an attempt to stall us as much as possible. While we managed to defeat a lot of mechs and disable two strategically-important tunneling machines, we failed to overcome their determination to extract with your mech."

Neither of them knew why the True Believers engaged in this awful trade. The value of a single beaten-up prototype of an unfinished mech design could never match up to the mechs and tunneling machines they lost.

No sane person would make this tradeoff unless they valued the prototype as much as an expert mech!

However, in the Ylvaine Protectorate, perhaps no one was more insane than the New Ylvaine Dynasty!

Ves tiredly rubbed his face. "I really have no idea what they are after. While my Transcendent Messenger is a great design, it's extremely hard to pilot and not that much of a terror on the battlefield. It's not worth losing seventeen mid-range mechs."

He was convinced the actual True Believers were responsible this time. Only people with no common sense would be willing to lose so many assets to obtain a single mech.

During the attack, he got a good glimpse of the mechs employed by the attackers. Unlike the cheap, bargain bin mechs deployed to attack the Church

of the Grand Martyr, the mechs this time all cost around 400 million Ylvainan dollars or 32 million bright credits!

The tunneling machines cost even more as they were designed to be difficult to detect and fast. The True Believers must definitely be hurting to lose two of these expensive and extremely useful assets. Their loss directly affected their future operations on this planet!

"Do you think they want to take credit for our mech design?" Ketis suddenly asked from the side. "If they publish the mech under the names of one of their mech designers, then all of our work would be for nothing!"

"That's not possible." Ves shook his head. "I've maintained extensive logs of the design process and any knowledgeable mech designer will realize that the Transcendent Messenger completely conforms to my design style. No plagiarist will succeed in taking credit for our work."

Incidents like this happened every now and then. Sometimes, the plagiarists got away with it, but most of the time the truth eventually came out. Each mech designer possessed a very distinct design style, which was like a fingerprint.

Ketis frowned while she idly scratched Lucky's chin. "Maybe the living prophet predicted the future and saw that we were developing a great mech. Maybe he wanted to obtain a copy himself and saw that this was the best opportunity for him to obtain a Transcendent Messenger."

This sounded so ridiculous that both Ves and the Protector officer scoffed.

"Stealing the Transcendent Messenger just to make use of it is antithetical to their extremist standpoints." Ves pointed out. "As far as I know, they've always been strong believers of Ylvainan supremacy. They're even more radical than the traditionalists in this regard. How could they possibly be seen piloting a mech designed by a foreigner?"

A sardonic smile appeared on her face. "You don't know how duplicitous these cultists can get. I've seen plenty of cults selectively break their own rules whenever it's convenient for them. Who knows what their living prophet was smoking when he decided he wanted to steal our prototype."

Did the living prophet himself order his subordinates to steal the prototype? That sounded very unlikely. What would he do with a hero mech?

"Is the living prophet a mech pilot?" Ves asked suspiciously.

"No." The Protector officer shook his head. "According to our files, he doesn't possess the right genetic aptitude. He has never been seen piloting a mech in his life."

Then what were the True Believers doing with the prototype? No one knew, and that made Ves more unsettled. He guessed that the fanatics definitely intended to put the prototype to use for their own purposes. Depending on what they did with his mech, their actions could be very damaging for his business prospects in the Protectorate.

After answering some questions about the mech, the Protector officer took Ves, Ketis and Lucky down to the security center.

The Protectors of the Faith managed to take quite a number of True Believers captive. Not only did they capture the mech pilots of the mechs they disabled, but they also captured the crews of the tunneling machines.

Right now, the Protectors were desperately interrogating them en masse before the Ylvainan Inquisition and other factions took them away.

The Protector officer requested a status update. After receiving a quick rundown of the progress the interrogators made so far, the man shook his head.

"None of our men have succeeded in prying open the mouths of the captives. I'll let you see for yourself."

They moved over to an observation chamber that monitored all of the ongoing interrogations. All of the screens and projections showed True Believers ranting madly at their interrogators?

"What is the purpose behind stealing Mr. Larkinson's prototype mech?" One of the interrogators asked.

The deranged fanatic mech pilot. "HAHAHAHAHA! The Ylvaine Dynasty will rise again! The Second Calamity will soon be upon us, and its tides will sweep over the entire star sector!"

"Answer the question! What is the reason for stealing the prototype?!"

"The prophet is reborn! The true Ylvaine Dynasty will sweep the rot that has festered in the Protectorate! The Ylvainan Faith must stand strong and stay true!"

The Protector officer cut the feed. "Every captive True Believer is like this. None of them are coherent enough to answer our questions because they are all hooked on a cocktail of stimulants. Any truth serums we inject will either result in no effect or push them over the edge. It will take weeks or months of specialized treatment to detoxify their bodies sufficiently to interrogate them while they are coherent."

That meant Ves likely wouldn't be able to obtain the answers to his questions anytime soon. Even if the mech pilots they captured this time appeared to be part of the New Ylvaine Dynasty's cadre, the way the cult was set up, they likely wouldn't be able to tell all that much in the first place.

Hours went by as the Kronons and Curins continued to deal with the aftermath. Ves and Ketis faced repeated questioning, but they were just as befuddled about the raid as the Ylvainans.

At some point, the dreaded Ylvainan Inquisition arrived at the subterranean testing ground. A team of robed inquisitors and staff moved into the security center to take some of the captives away.

Ves met a very familiar figure at this time.

"Mr. Larkinson. You just can't stay out of trouble, can you? It is rather peculiar that you are involved yet again with the True Believers."

"Unwillingly, Your Excellency. I don't want anything to do with those terrorists." Ves replied with a strained smile.

High Inquisitor Xefin Lin Poxco studied Ves and Ketis with his very sharp pair of eyes. "Your presence in the Protectorate is a security risk and a disaster to this planet. If it were up to us, we'd expel you from our state right this instance. Unfortunately, the Curins don't think so. Please do us all a favor and return where you came from before you provoke the True Believers into taking action yet again."

"I do not have a habit of giving up once I've accepted an assignment. As long as Madame Cecily hasn't canceled her commission, I'm committed to seeing it to completion."

After a bit of chitchat, the high inquisitor marched off in order to supervise his men. Ves continued to maintain his smile until the old man walked out of sight.

"What a creepy bastard." Ketis muttered. "He knows he can't do anything to us, so he resorts to puffing himself up in order to intimidate us into leaving."

Ves lightly smacked her head. "Don't talk like that in a place like this. The esteemed high inquisitor is a very influential figure among the Attendants of Ylvaine. Don't give him an excuse to take us into custody."

Obviously, the only reason the high inquisitor refrained from doing so was because Ves still enjoyed the backing of Madame Cecily and by extension the Curin Dynasty.

However, with each incident he became involved in, the more pressure the Curins endured. If Ves kept getting swept up in major incidents, then the Curins would no longer be able to protect him. At that point, he'd be forced to leave the Protectorate, which he really didn't want to do before he completed the commission.

His pride as a mech designer compelled him to fulfill his promises.

Now that the Ylvainan Inquisition had arrived to take over a part of the follow-up investigation, Ves and Ketis glumly departed the subterranean testing ground.

Perhaps the only consolation was that they managed to return with a secure data chip containing all the data the facility gathered from the tests of the prototype. Only the final stress tests on the agenda had been skipped, which meant that Ves almost got all of the data he needed to improve his design for a second iteration.

After a long shuttle ride back to the guest compound at Krent, Ketis and Lucky went off to cuddle and play in private.

Meanwhile, Ves met with Leland and explained what happened after the latter activated his signal jammer.

"It's a shame that the ongoing curfew makes it difficult for me to get in touch with my informers." Leland sighed. "While I'm aware that the True Believers have built up a strong presence on this planet, I never heard any indications that they were aiming to obtain one of your prototypes."

"Can you think of any reasons what the True Believers plan to do with my mech?"

He shrugged. "I can't say for certain. Perhaps they wish to discredit you somehow by employing your mech in outrageous acts such as attacking the grand cathedral or laying waste to a school. It would be the crudest and most direct method to turn the Ylvainans against you. After all, the attacks wouldn't happen if you weren't designing such a deadly mech!"

This reasoning sounded crazy, yet as long as it advanced their agenda, Ves could see the True Believers doing it. As long as the media aligned with the traditionalists exaggerated the role of the stolen prototype in any violent acts it perpetrated, then Ves would definitely receive a lot of blame!

However, as crazy as the True Believers appeared to be, Ves wasn't entirely convinced of this possibility.

Chapter 1217 Charming Meeting

Ves took a few days off to get to terms with the latest setback. He felt devastated about the theft of his prototype.

The thought of those fanatics taking the prototype back to one of their hidden bases in order to repair and pervert the mech galled him to no end.

If the True Believers subsequently employed the prototype in one of their terrorist attacks, then everything that Leland described would definitely come to pass!

Ves would suffer the blame for arming the True Believers with such a prominent mech! The fact that he was the victim here and wasn't responsible for the misdeeds the extremists performed didn't matter! The traditionalists would rile up the Ylvainans until everyone wanted him gone!

To be honest, Ves didn't feel very indignant about this possibility. He sold so many mechs to so many buyers that some of them had definitely used his mechs for nefarious purposes. He indirectly became responsible for an untold amount of deaths and property damage.

As a mech designer, if Ves obsessed with the morality of every mech pilot that used one of his products, he'd be driven insane!

Therefore, from a moral standpoint, Ves didn't find it all that repugnant that a bunch of religious extremists planned to make use of one of his mechs.

When Ketis checked up on Ves, Ves revealed the true reason why the theft left him indignant.

"The prototype is an unfinished version of my design!" He yelled. "These True Believers have no respect for the design process! Even though it's already a fantastic mech, that still doesn't change the fact that it's the first iteration of my design! There are so many flaws and imperfections that impact its performance that it's shameful if the True Believers plan to make use of the prototype in its current form!"

Ketis widened her eyes. "You.. you're pissed at the True Believers because they stole a copy of an incomplete design?"

"YES! The prototype is never meant for actual use! If they wanted to steal one of my mechs, I'd rather they wait until I complete my design and fabricate the final copies! The mechs I produce at that time will definitely be able to showcase the full potential of our Transcendent Messenger design!"

How could he tolerate such a travesty? Ves wanted to wring the neck of the living prophet himself for daring to make use of his prototype! The mech they obtained didn't represent his actual work!

While Ves wanted to rage, Ketis had already gotten over the theft. It was just a mech, so what? They at least received most of the test data they set out to gather. After the prototype finished its stress testing, it was destined to be dismantled and recycled. At least now the prototype gained a new life.

Her nonchalant attitude towards the theft reflected her background as a pirate. Ves knew that everyone engaged in robbery if they could get away with it. The

side with the strongest fist had the most say. Victims who lost their valuables only had themselves to blame for being so weak.

Still, that didn't mean that Ketis forgave the True Believers for their act. While she didn't possess the same level of pride in her profession as Ves, she disliked being taken advantage of! If she was still in the frontier, then she would definitely retaliate somehow!

Unfortunately, the rules were different in civilized space. Not only that, but they were guests of the Curin Dynasty in the Protectorate, so they were heavily restricted in their actions.

However, just because she couldn't go out on her own didn't mean she could do nothing. She suddenly grinned and gazed down to Lucky who was enjoying her continued ministrations.

"Maybe you can help, Lucky."

"Meow?"

"You can sneak out of the compound, right buddy? What do you say about exploring the city. There's bound to be underground hidey holes where the True Believers stashed their stuff. Why not go and ruin them? I'm sure we'll be able to pay back the True Believers for all of the damaged they caused!"

"Meow.."

"Why are you so reluctant? Aren't you a glutton for exotics? The True Believers are maintaining their own stockpiles for the stuff in order to service their mechs and other machines. That's free food for you as long as you can sneak inside without getting detected!"

"Meow..."

Lucky seriously contemplated the suggestion. With the new toy he received, his ability to sneak in and out of highly-guarded places improved considerably!

Yet just because he can, didn't mean he should!

"Don't think about it, Lucky." Ves scoffed. "The True Believers are incredibly dangerous. Their stockpiles aren't so easy to steal, especially if you come back for repeats."

"Meow!"

While Lucky didn't entirely agree with Ves, the cat eventually thought better of it. Scouring the city for the hideouts of the True Believers was a lot of work. Rather than spend so much time and effort to comb the entire city, he would rather stay with Ves and eat his daily dose of exotics! He still hadn't consumed the enormous reward he gained for stealing the holy relic from the grand cathedral!

"Keep an eye on Lucky, Ketis. Don't allow him to run off."

"I'll try." She promised.

Because of the recent incident, Kesseling VIII entered into a state of heightened alert yet again. After months of fruitless searching, the Ylvainan authorities were pretty desperate to root the True Believers from the planet. Now that the fanatics finally made a move, the Protectors of the Faith and the Ylvainan Inquisition tried their best to follow the trails before they grew cold.

A lot of mechs and vehicles moved around the city for the next few days. The authorities tightened the curfew and barred all non-essential traffic. They showed a lot of determination to ruining the plans of the New Ylvaine Dynasty.

Ves didn't have much hope that they could stop the True Believers. The True Believers had spies and informers everywhere. The sympathisers would definitely tip off the extremists if the authorities were close to uncovering one of their cells.

He spent his time analysing some of the raw data the testing ground recorded in his room. While he would have been able to process the data much faster at the mech workshop, for now he had no choice but to work from his temporary home.

The tests revealed many different issues that needed to be addressed. Ves continually optimized the design on the basis of his analysis of the test data. None of the problems posed much of a challenge to him at his current ability.

As Ves made a lot of progress in optimizing his design, he was forced to halt his work when a special visitor arrived at his guest compound.

He walked down to the foyer to an unusual sight.

"Charmed to meet you, Leland." Calabast gently shook the man's hand.

Leland responded with a gentle smile. "Likewise, Director Cecily. We appreciate everything you have done to accommodate our stay in the Protectorate. Without your help, we would have never been able to resist the demands of the Ylvainan Inquisition."

"Mr. Larkinson is an admirably young and dynamic mech designer. The Bright Republic is lucky to have him. He's exactly what the Protectorate needs in order to revitalize our stagnant mech market. Although the theft of your prototype is regrettable, the fact that the True Believers desire the mech in the first place speaks volumes about the quality of its design."

"We aim to please, madame. This setback hasn't affected our ability to fulfill your commission. Your mechs will definitely be ready and delivered on schedule!"

As the two amiable spies chatted with each other, Ves tried his best to keep his composure.

Although both of them belonged to the same kind, Ves had a feeling that Leland was completely clueless who he was dealing with! Calabast had already revealed she knew that Leland was working for Flashlight!

Yet during this polite conversation, Calabast maintained her role as an influential member of the Curin Dynasty to perfection. Her gentle and aristocratic demeanor exposed no flaws at all.

As observant as Leland could be, he probably had no idea of the monster he currently faced!

"Madame Cecily." Ves greeted her as he approached the two. "You can speak with my staffer later, but let's discuss some business first."

The woman smiled coyly at Ves. "Very well."

The two headed up to his room at the top floor of the compound. Once they left their bodyguards behind the door, Calabast activated her jamming devices before she dropped her mild facade.

"Leland is an interesting fellow. He's quite good in his spycraft for his age. If he grew up in a more advanced state, then he might be able to give me a run for my money."

"Please don't string him along. If anything happens to Leland, I'm on the hook." Ves sighed in exasperation.

"Do you know why Flashlight assigned him to accompany you?"

"No, and as long as it doesn't interfere with my goals, I don't care."

Calabast nodded in approval. "That's a prudent mindset to take. While I'm aware that Leland is engaged in a number of activities on this planet, he's merely furthering the interests of his state. He's relatively harmless all considered."

"I'm glad you think so."

He had to admit that ever since Ves struck his deal with Calabast, he was worried that she would but heads with Leland. Both of them were spies who posed a threat to each other if they managed to sniff out their secrets.

That didn't happen, to Ves' relief. Calabast was so superior to Leland that she could keep him blind and deaf as much as she wanted without the latter growing any wiser.

It depressed Ves a bit that someone as sneaky as Leland stood no chance against Calabast. He couldn't rely on Leland and Flashlight to constrain Calabast if she ever acted unreasonably.

The power balance in their partnership was heavily skewed towards Calabast. Ves couldn't get rid of her no matter what, but Calabast could easily cut ties and stab him in the back if she ever decided that she didn't need him anymore.

Ves needed to find a way to achieve parity with Calabast. At the very least, he needed to have more say in their partnership.

"Let's discuss the recent incident." She said, getting down to the main reason why she wanted to meet with Ves. "From what my sources have determined so far, the True Believers who raided the testing ground aren't fake. There's too many evidence that suggest that they are authentic adherents to the New Ylvaine Dynasty, from the mech models they employed to the type of conditioning administered to the fanatics in order to strengthen their loyalty."

That concurred with his own speculation. "I thought that might be the case. It's strange how well they planned this operation. From the sabotage to their routes, they knew exactly where to go. Didn't you say the personnel of the testing ground had been vetted?"

"No precaution is perfect, kid. You should know that." She admonished him. "Just because I expressed confidence in the security of the testing ground

doesn't mean I can guarantee that nothing is amiss. So far, the investigations have found out the pivotal reason why the raid had been so successful. The director is the main culprit responsible for allowing the True Believers to sneak up on the testing ground."

"Didn't he get shot by a fanatic?"

"That was merely to silence him. He knew too much."

Ves didn't know what to feel about this revelation. It sounded small compared to everything else he experienced recently.

"I always thought the director was a bit too reluctant to express his support for the reform agenda. It turns out he's a hidden sympathiser." He muttered.

"There's something else we found out after interrogating the captives. While they aren't exactly the most coherent bunch, there are still ways to squeeze useful information out of them. It's just that we aren't sure yet if they are speaking the truth."

"What did you find out, Calabast?"

"We're not certain yet, but there's a chance that the living prophet himself has arrived at Kesseling VIII!"

"What?!"

Chapter 1218 Extraordinary Threshold

What possessed the living prophet of the New Ylvaine Dynasty for him to enter the Kesseling System? Why would he risk sneaking onto the surface of Kesseling VIII?

There was nothing on the planet that should have merited the attention of the leader of a vast terrorist organization!

"Mind you, Ves, the authorities aren't certain yet if the living prophet is actually here. This intel hasn't been corroborated yet. For all we know, these are merely the mad ramblings of stimulant-addled fanatics." Calabast cautioned.

The sources were far too unreliable. No one should take their words seriously.

However, Ves didn't necessarily think so. For Calabast to relay this intel despite its dubious origins meant she might know something more.

"Do you think it might be true?"

"There is a chance the madmen haven't been lying. The only problem is that the living prophet is taking an immense risk by sneaking onto this planet. This doesn't match his elusive and risk-averse nature. He usually spends his time on a hidden vessel floating in deep space issuing orders to the various cells of his organizations. For him to abandon his caution means that there is something important going on here that warrants his presence."

"Is he after my prototype?"

"That doesn't make much sense. The living prophet isn't a mech pilot. Even if he was, he has plenty of sympathisers in the mech industry to draw upon if he requires a personal mech."

If the living prophet wanted to obtain the prototype, he could have issued some orders and let his subordinates take care of the rest. It didn't warrant a personal visit to the planet.

For what reason did the living prophet himself descend on Kesseling VIII?

"Don't wrack your head over it, kid." Calabast said and shook her head. "For now, leave these matters to me and the Ylvainans. You should get back to work and complete your design as fast as possible. Aside from losing your prototype, it's running along quite well, right?"

She was right. There was no use for him to puzzle over this matter. These events went largely over his head. He much preferred to turn his attention back to his work.

"The Transcendent Messenger is almost finished, but it will still take some time for me to optimize the design to a point where I'm satisfied with declaring it finished."

"Is there any way you can accelerate your work? At this point, it's better if you complete the commission as fast as possible. The longer you delay, the greater the risk that something might happen that puts us all at risk. No matter whether the living prophet is on this planet or not, the True Believers will definitely make use of your mech in some way."

Ves grimaced at the suggestion. "You do your work and I do mine. Even if you're the client, don't tell me what to do. I won't rush my mech design. It's unacceptable and I will never tolerate such a demand unless I have no other choice."

"Yes, I think we've already reached that point." She said with a tired expression. "With all of the interests converging on this planet, the vortex has become too dangerous for us. Perhaps all of the factions are aware that the future of the Ylvaine Protectorate is at stake. There are many extremists who are willing to do something drastic if that means securing the future they want."

For all of her prowess, Calabast was only a single woman. She could no longer exert any control over the events happening on Kesseling VIII. The Curins, Poxcos and True Believers had all converged on this unremarkable planet in significant numbers.

Gathering so many forces together was like stuffing a keg with powder. At some point, a single spark was enough to blow it all up!

Still, Ves stuck to his principles.

"I am not willing to compromise on my stance. Every mech I've designed must represent my best efforts. If I'm being asked to design a mech for a competition or a design duel, then it's fine if I rush my design process. But that's not the case. I only have one time limit, and I still have a decent amount of time left to go before I turn thirty."

No matter what Calabast said, Ves stubbornly insisted on completing his design on his terms.

The recent theft of his prototype traumatized him so much that he wanted his finished product to be distinctly better!

The greater the differences, the more he was able to devalue the prototype! The mech the True Believers stole must always be inferior to the authentic copies of his finished design!

This did not sit well with Calabast. "I really want to smack your face, you now. You're being unreasonable here. Are your principles more important than your life?"

"I don't think we've reached that point." He said. "With all of the security in place, it isn't easy to attack me. The only reason why I was at risk earlier was because I went on an excursion to the subterranean testing ground. I don't plan to go out again when my subsequent prototypes are put to the test."

Although Ves recognized that he was still at risk, he didn't think it warranted a premature end to the design project. He really wouldn't be able to stand it if he was forced to complete the design in a matter of days! He would rather let Lucky scratch his face with his energy claws than endure the torment of publishing a bad and incomplete mech design!

Calabast crossed her arms and shook her head. "You're way too obstinate for your own good. How did your mother ever raise you to become such an obstinate brat?"

"She died, you know." Ves replied flatly.

"I know. Shouldn't you respect her more by behaving properly? She'd probably be aghast at your reckless decisions. She didn't bring you into this galaxy only for you to throw away your life so early."

He couldn't help but chuckle at that. "You don't know my mother."

It didn't appear that Calabast was aware of the mysteries surrounding his mother. For all of her vaunted ability to root out secrets, there were some that remained beyond her reach. The secret surrounding his mother was far more difficult to penetrate than anything else.

A part of him even wanted Calabast to succeed in tracing his mother's background. At the very least, she would probably share her findings.

They discussed some other matters before Calabast left. She failed to persuade him to rush his design project, so she didn't want to stick around any longer. The sooner she left, the sooner Ves went back to work.

As Calabast left, Ves didn't immediately return to work. Instead, he went back to the ground floor of the guest compound and visited a side building that he had never gone to before.

He entered a small Ylvainan chapel and sat down at one of the pews.

Anyone who was observing Ves right now would think that he had gone mad or converted to the faith. Why would he visit a place of worship?

Ves didn't care what other people thought. He merely wanted to find somewhere quiet to center his thoughts. He also wanted to communicate with

Ylvaine's spiritual fragment, and what better place to do so than a chapel dedicated to his faith?

"Do you know why the living prophet stole my prototype?" He mentally asked.

The fragment pulsed in contentment as it appreciated the chapel.

"Is the living prophet aware of your existence?"

The fragment didn't respond.

"Is the living prophet capable of predicting the future?"

This time, the fragment pulsed. Ves tried to process the feeling the fragment wanted to convey, but couldn't figure it out. The pulse was too ambiguous!

"Can I even get any clear answer out of you?!"

The fragment pulsed again. This time, it responded with disapproval, as if Ves was overstepping his boundaries!

He became frustrated at the spiritual fragment's lack of cooperation. It used to be relatively simple when Ves initially refined it, but as time went by, it grew more intelligent.

It was like a bot evolved into a sentient AI! The transformation happened gradually, but proceeded continuously without any signs of stopping!

Ves didn't even know what was happening anymore. He might have been too reckless with refining such a powerful spiritual fragment. Right now, the strength of Ylvaine's spiritual fragment was identical to that of a seasoned expert pilot!

Both expert pilots and Journeyman Mech Designers were special compared to the rest of humanity. The main reason for that was that both developed their spirituality to the point where they surpassed a certain threshold and transformed into a higher state!

There was something remarkable about this higher state of spirituality. Whether it was expert pilots, Journeyman Mech Designers or spiritual fragments, each entity with spirituality that exceeded this threshold had become something extraordinary.

Ves thought that Qilanxo's spiritual fragment was smart because its strength vastly exceeded anything he witnessed before. He assumed that Ylvaine's spiritual fragment wouldn't be able to grow this smart because it originally consisted of a tiny remnant of Ylvaine's spirituality.

Now, he wasn't so sure anymore.

"Are you.. Prophet Ylvaine come to life?" He mentally asked.

He didn't know what possessed him to ask such a ridiculous question. The dead were dead. They shouldn't be able to come back to life, let alone rebuild themselves from a tiny spiritual piece of themselves!

Well, his mother was kind of weird, but that didn't count!

The spiritual fragment didn't respond with a pulse. Instead, it emanated an aura that was several times stronger than its last exertion! The aura radiated a strong and unflinching faith in its beliefs!

What this meant, Ves didn't know. Did the fragment consider itself as a reincarnation of the prophet or was it merely telling him in its own way that it didn't care?

Whatever the case, getting any solid answers from the fragment seemed hopeless. It had become just as cryptic as the actual prophet back when he was alive!

"What do you think about my mech design, then? Are you satisfied with what I've developed so far?"

This time, the fragment pulsed in plain approval. It liked the design very much.

This response didn't surprise Ves as the spiritual fragment had a lot of say in how the Transcendent Messenger took shape.

"Don't you feel pissed that a genetic impostor of yours has stolen my prototype?"

The fragment answered with another ambiguous pulse. It was being deliberately mysterious again for some reason.

"Really. Aren't you afraid the so-called living prophet will tarnish your name with my mech?"

This didn't elicit any response from the fragment. Either it didn't understand the implications, or it didn't want to comment on what was happening.

Ves was already familiar with the silent treatment. The System almost never answered his inquiries.

He understood why the System kept its mouth shut. There was no reason for it to entertain Ves and satisfy his curiosity. As long as Ves furthered the System's agenda, it could sit back and relax.

What disturbed Ves a bit was that Ylvaine's spiritual fragment had grown sophisticated enough to adopt the reasoning. The fragment turned from a passive spiritual entity into something smart enough to develop its own agenda!

Ves regretted hosting the spiritual fragment in his mind. He should have fabricated a miniature mech or some other totem to serve as its temporary home. At least then it wouldn't snoop so much in his mind and learn some of his traits.

He knew very well that someone with his personality was very hard to deal with! Just like him, the spiritual fragment was probably looking out for itself!

"Don't learn from me." He belatedly told the fragment. "I'm not a believer. You should stick to your own values."

He didn't know whether his words had any effect or not. Hopefully, he would soon be able to complete his design, whereby he could finally get rid of the spiritual fragment from his mind!

"Soon, you won't be my problem anymore!"

Chapter 1219 Sound Judgement

Life went on. Although the loss of the prototype impacted his mood considerably, Ves knew he shouldn't dwell on it too much.

"The most important task right now is to finish the design." He whispered to himself.

He cast away as much distractions as possible and let go of his concerns about his volatile surroundings. The contradiction between the reformers and traditionalists still raged on, but his role was set in stone.

Completing the design of the Transcendent Messenger mattered more than anything else. His plans and Calabast's plans hinged on its success.

When Ves and Ketis finally returned to the workshop, they went back to work. Ves already analyzed a good amount of test data, but the processors at the guest compound were too weak for his purposes. The mech workshop offered much more capable processor banks that specialized in performing mass calculations typical to engineering projects.

"When the design process has reached this stage, the time for second-guessing and major revisions has passed." Ves explained to Ketis as he showed her the preliminary changes he made to the design. "All of our design choices are set. The changes we can afford to make at this stage should not impact any of them negatively. Our goal is to work away the flaws while perfecting what is already good about the design."

Ketis nodded. "I know. If we go back on our design choices at this point, we'd be designing a variant instead of the base model."

Mech designers needed to be decisive in their judgement during the earlier stages of the design process. If their hesitation on some of the choices grew more serious by the time they received the test results of their first prototype, then they didn't do a good enough job.

"This is important, Ketis. A lot of mech designers get hung up over 'what-ifs' or magnify the negative aspects of their compromise solutions. They'll go back to their design and shift the very nature of their mech into something else. That's not good. You need to have the confidence that you can make your mech great from the decisions you've already made. Look forward instead of gazing back at the past."

While Ves already learned this at school, Ketis never entered one. These kinds of suboptimal traits afflicted many mech designers despite receiving plenty of warnings. Perfectionists particularly exhibited this pattern of behavior, causing them to take several times longer to complete their mech designs.

Fortunately, neither Ves nor Ketis exhibited too much tendency to turn back to their designs. Both of them were decisive people and they didn't worship quality on a pedestal.

Ves wanted his mechs to be as good as possible, but only as far as practical concerns allowed him to. Due to the deadline he imposed on himself, he didn't have much time left to optimize the Transcendent Messenger. He would just have to make do with one or two more prototypes before he finalized its design.

"Let's get to work."

Ves performed the bulk of the work this time. Each change, no matter how small, affected a myriad of parameters of the mech. This was very delicate work and required a deep and comprehensive understanding on mech design in order to juggle all of the tradeoffs he needed to make.

At this time, Ketis still lacked this depth and breadth of knowledge, so she could only perform an assisting role by supervising the simulations and such.

The optimization work he performed was like solving puzzles. There were countless ways to solve each problem, but only a small number of them actually led to an actual improvement in the design.

One solution always introduced another problem. The key to improving the design was to make sure the new problem that resulted was smaller or less significant than the old problem. While Ves could never obtain a perfect solution, at the very least the mech design achieved a net gain in performance.

The more he optimized the mech, the harder it became for him to find a solution that resulted in clear improvements. It felt like he needed to make use of a microscope in order to determine whether it was worthwhile to implement his solutions.

Nonetheless, the Transcendent Messenger design became increasingly more polished over the next days. His design seed worked wonders at this stage. He could judge the best solution for many problems without resorting to time-consuming calculations and simulations.

Naturally, his design seed only helped him come up with a solution that he would have been able to figure out on his own.

In other words, his knowledge base formed the foundation of his design seed. If he hadn't studied too much in a particular field, then his design seed had

very little to go on. It possessed the same biases as him and could never come up with a solution based on knowledge that he lacked.

"It's not an auto designer."

Nonetheless, even if his design seed couldn't automate everything to perfection, the boost it provided to Ves was just right. He still needed to wrack his brains and perform some manual calculations in order to solve particularly difficult problems.

His design seed only came in handy when he faced easier but extremely tedious problems.

All in all, Ves initially expected that he needed at least two weeks to complete the second iteration of the design.

Yet by the time a week had gone by, he no longer found any issues that needed addressing!

"That was fast." Ketis commented after Ves declared they completed the second iteration. "I remember that Mayra worked just as fast when optimizing her designs. You Journeymen are beyond human in this aspect! I can't even keep up with your problem-solving pace!"

"It's a convenience, I admit, but it's not a panacea. You still have to do the most important work yourself. If you want to get to this point, make sure to keep up with your studies and accumulate more knowledge."

"I don't even know how many books I have to read to match your mind. How come you know so much but never spend much time on studying?" She suspiciously asked.

Ves only smiled coyly in return. "I'm a fast learner."

"Yeah right. I know you're good at that, but your learning speed is too fast!"

He shrugged off her questions as best he could, but the suspicion lingered. Ketis worked alongside Ves for many months now. She wasn't blind to the oddities surrounding him. Perhaps the only reason why she didn't inquire any further was because they were all benign.

As Ves declared the second iteration of the design to be complete, they proceeded to fabricate the mech at the workshop. He had already ordered several batches of materials beforehand, so they could immediately proceed with fabricating the mech.

Several days later, they produced the second prototype.

"It doesn't look very different from the first one."

"That's the point, Ketis. To optimize a mech is to achieve the best gains while making as little changes as possible. If the iterations looked distinctly different, then that is a sign the first iteration shouldn't have stopped at that point in the first place. Whoever decided to end the design process prematurely at that point is lacking in judgement."

Over and over, Ves emphasized the importance of judgement. Good judgement not only helped with making the best design choices, but also made sure that the mech design drew out its potential.

Each mech designer optimized their mechs in a different way. Two different mech designers working on the same iteration of a mech design would produce two subtly-differed optimized mech designs.

In most cases, the mech designer with the better judgement achieved greater improvement. It didn't matter if the other mech designer possessed a greater knowledge base.

"Building up your knowledge base only expands your options. The more you know, the more you're able to come up with advanced solutions to tricky problems." Ves lectured to Ketis, who looked to be a little tired at getting

talked down to all the time. "However, all that knowledge will go to waste if you don't possess the right judgement. Learning how to utilize your existing knowledge is important, and it can only be done when you design your own mechs."

"I get it, I get it. Being nerdy isn't enough. You have to possess the wits to compliment your smarts."

She understood the importance of the lessons, but sometimes she felt like she was being treated like a kid.

"What do you think about the Transcendent Messenger so far?" Ves asked.

"It's already really good. Better than the Aurora Titan in many ways because it's so versatile. However, there's something about your last design that's really special that isn't present in our prototypes."

"That's related to my design philosophy. The true magic can only be felt once I complete the design. Trust me, the Transcendent Messenger will fully live up to its name once the finished products roll off the production line."

She nodded in understanding and didn't say anything further. She knew it was pointless trying to ask any further.

When it came time to pack off the second prototype for testing, he handed it over to the professionals employed by the Curin Dynasty.

Due to the theft of the first prototype, the Curins became aware that the mech that Ves was designing must be something remarkable. They pulled a lot of strings and managed to convince the Kronons to beef up the security around the subsequent prototypes.

Three full mech companies escorted the transport containing the prototype to a specialized testing ground a small distance away from Krent. The Protectors

of the Faith pulled out all the stops in order to prevent a similar incident from occurring again.

Ves did not accompany the prototype this time. He trusted the staff of the testing ground to know what they were doing and obtain the test data he needed to see whether his judgement was sound.

A different elite mech pilot in service to Calabast volunteered as the test pilot for the second prototype this time. As for the first test pilot, the man personally arrived at the guest compound in order to meet with Ves in private.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Larkinson. I failed to stop the True Believers from stealing your mech."

Taon Melin appeared much different from before. He looked devastated. His confident demeanor was nowhere to be seen and the bags in his eyes showed that he wasn't sleeping well lately.

"I don't blame you, Taon. Near the end of the stress testing, the prototype you piloted was already beat up. Against the sudden intrusion of so many mechs at a time, your mech stood no chance of repelling them. This isn't an action dramas where damaged hero mechs often win against overwhelming odds. The conditions simply weren't right back then. We can only blame the True Believers for their great timing."

Informers like the director of the testing ground assisted the True Believers in their planning and preparation. The Protectors of the Faith were completely caught off-guard and hadn't learned the true purpose of the raid in time. There was nothing Taon could do to stop the True Believers from making off with the prototype.

He still blamed himself, though.

"I have been reflecting on myself, and I think it is best for me to resign my position as one of Director Cecily's ceremonial guard mech pilots. It's a position that conveys great honor, but it's one that I don't deserve!"

Ves frowned. If Taon withdrew, then who piloted the Transcendent Messenger in his place? He didn't wish to deviate from his plan of designing a set of six mechs. This mech pilot needed to get his head back together!

"Man up, Taon! You're an elite, right? You're still young! Failure is normal! I don't know why you're so hung up on what happened. You couldn't have done better in that situation."

"That doesn't change the fact that I've failed! If the great prophet saw me now, he would shake his head in disappointment! I'm unfit to be a mech pilot!"

Ves grew alarmed. Taon was taking his failure way too seriously!

However, something else happened in this time. Just after Taon mentioned the prophet, Ylvaine's spiritual fragment began to stir.

It seemed to be reacting to Taon. Just as Ves wondered what the spiritual fragment was up to, it spontaneously blasted out of his mind!

The fragment left his mind so abruptly that Ves hadn't been ready to block its escape! It broke through the passive barriers of his mind and entered into Taon's mind in an instant!

The elite Kronon mech pilot gasped before he rolled his eyes and fainted!

Chapter 1220 Divine Touch

Ves had no idea what was going on!

In one moment, Taon was blaming himself for his failures, and in the next, Ylvaine's spiritual fragment suddenly jumped into his mindscape!

The Protectors of the Faith instantly moved into the room after their monitoring system detected something amiss. They immediately took Taon away to the infirmary when they realized that he had fainted for some reason.

"What happened here, Mr. Larkinson?" One of the Protectors asked.

"I don't know. I was just talking with Taon when he suddenly went out cold. I didn't do anything. Maybe his exhaustion and his depression got the better of him. He wasn't in the best shape when he arrived."

While Ves talked to Taon in private, he hadn't activated any signal jammers or ECM this time. The Protectors should have assigned some men to monitor their conversation, so the Protectors already knew that Ves told the truth.

The Protectors quickly dismissed their suspicions towards him. As they studied Taon's condition, it became clear that he hadn't slept for a couple of days and didn't eat right.

Even though his body was in excellent condition and shouldn't have fainted so suddenly, perhaps his psychological conditions aggravated his neglect.

As Ves stopped by the infirmary, the resident doctor frowned at the readings scrolling through his console.

"What's the matter, doctor? Is there anything amiss?"

"Mr. Melin is showing some unusual brain activity for someone who has fainted. It's as if he is still conscious in a way." The man in Protector uniform said. "I can't make any solid conclusions on what is afflicting this young man. The database hasn't found a match either. It's rather fascinating to see something new taking place."

"So you don't know what's happening?"

The doctor hesitated a bit. "It shouldn't be harmful, I think. None of the signs have exceeded their safety margins. It could be that Taon is experiencing an

unusual vivid dream. I'll continue to monitor his state, and if it appears the situation is growing dire, I'll request that he be brought to a military hospital."

Although the doctor didn't know what was happening, the fluctuations in his brain activity weren't extreme enough to elicit serious concern.

As the doctor continued to puzzle over the data, Ves discreetly employed his spiritual vision.

He perceived something very different from Taon when he switched over his senses. The mech pilot's head appeared to be surrounded by a radiant glow!

That was the aura that belonged to Ylvaine's spiritual fragment! While Ves was able to contain the aura in his mind, Taon lacked the strength to do so. The spiritual fragment freely radiated its aura beyond the boundaries of the mech pilot's mind!

As Ves projected his spirituality and attempted to brush against Taon's mind, he encountered a wall.

Ylvaine's spiritual fragment was blocking his senses from extending into Taon's mind!

What was it doing in Taon's head? Why did it prevent Ves from taking a look?

Although Ves could probably chip a hole in the wall if he attacked it with his Spirituality, he refrained from doing so. He needed to maintain a friendly relation with the spiritual fragment and it didn't appear that it was doing something bad to Taon.

To many Ylvainans, it was a blessing if they could get in touch with the great prophet!

Though Taon Melin joined the Ascensionists, he was still a devout believer of the Ylvainan Faith. For Ylvaine's spiritual fragment to bestow its attention on the elite mech pilot should be good.

After thirty minutes had passed, the glow around Taon's mind ceased. Ylvaine's spiritual fragment shuttled out of the unconscious mech pilot's mind and zipped back into Ves' mind as if it returned home after a good day of work!

Upon the fragment's return, Ves hesitated whether he should allow it to come back. If he wanted to, he could put up his defenses and bar the fragment from entering unless it launched an attack.

He quickly shook his head and voluntarily widened up a gap for the fragment to slip back into his mind.

Although he grew more and more unsettled with the fragment, he still wanted to maintain control over it. While the fragment had already shown that it could break out whenever it wanted to, Ves still preferred to keep it within his reach.

It would be devastating to Ves if the spiritual fragment disappeared!

"What did you do in Taon's mind?" He mentally asked.

The spiritual fragment didn't even deign to answer his question. Instead, it reduced its activity level and entered into a dormant state again.

Seeing that he couldn't prod the fragment into providing answers, he gave up on it and directed his attention to Taon instead.

Had the fragment done something to him? Ves curiously extended his spiritual senses to the mech pilot's mind.

This time, he encountered no hindrance. However, he hadn't encountered anything remarkable either. Most of Taon's mind was still formless and insubstantial, which made it difficult for Ves to perceive and interact with. It was like they existed in different dimensions that barely overlapped.

"No changes?"

The limitations didn't stop him from judging the overall state of Taon's mind and spirit. What his probes had found was that neither of them drastically changed. Perhaps the only difference from before that much of the unrest in the mech pilot's mind had disappeared.

Instead, Ves perceived that Taon's mind was currently at peace with itself. This was a very substantial divergence from before! Back when Taon first lamented over his failures, his distress and his self-loathing was so strong that Ves could feel the emotion behind his words.

Yet now, none of that was present. A single visit from Ylvaine's spiritual fragment washed away the mech pilots doubts.

Was this all the spiritual fragment had done?

Ves hadn't found anything else. Taon still retained his single-minded focus and faith, but his spiritual energy was too weak for him to develop his own force of will.

Taon hadn't turned into an expert candidate all of a sudden. This relieved Ves a bit because it would have been too inexplicable for the young elite to advance after suffering such a huge blow recently.

Ylvaine's spiritual fragment wasn't as powerful as Qilanxo's spiritual fragment.

If Ylvaine's spiritual fragment wanted to elevate Taon into an expert candidate for some reason, then it needed to donate a significant amount of its own spiritual energy.

It also needed to employ the right methods. Qilanxo might be familiar with it, but Ylvaine's spiritual fragment wouldn't know where to begin.

When the spiritual fragment left Taon's mind and returned, Ves didn't perceive any changes in its strength level. It still possessed the same strength as before, which meant that it was highly unlikely that it gave any of it away.

As Ves continued to puzzle over what the spiritual fragment had been up to, Taon finally woke up half an hour later.

Taon calmly opened his eyes and showed no confusion at all as he took in his surroundings. "It appears I'm in the infirmary."

"How are you feeling, Mr. Melin?" The doctor asked as he approached his bed. "You abruptly fainted while you were conversing with Mr. Larkinson."

"That's my fault. I didn't take care of myself due to my restlessness."

"It's good that you're aware."

The doctor proceeded to advise Taon to mind his health and pay attention to his needs. The advice was rather generic and Ves ignored it in favor of studying the mech pilot's condition.

The calm in his mind reflected the calm in his demeanor. The differences from before were very significant!

"I promise I'll pay attention, doctor." Taon nodded. "I'll be returning now."

As Taon left the infirmary, Ves walked alongside him on the way out.

"You scared us quite a bit. I'm glad to see that you're okay. You look a lot calmer now as well."

"I think I experienced a divine revelation!" He stated with sudden fervor. His eyes lit up and his mood grew more excited. "It's difficult for me to describe what I felt. It was as if the great prophet himself has descended to our realm and gifted with a vision!"

Ves almost tripped. What the hell? Did Ylvaine spiritual fragment really enter Taon's mind just to communicate a vision to the mech pilot?

"What did you see? It must have been very remarkable for you to be so relaxed right now."

Taon gazed upwards as he recalled what he saw. "It's difficult to describe. I felt like I was dreaming, but more. I can tell you that it's a vision of the future. The revelation showed me what I could become if I got my act together. It was a glorious vision of six of your amazing mechs standing together and fighting against a great threat! This vision is a warning of what is to come! It was exactly what I need to find my purpose again. My prayers have been answered!"

Ves wanted to puke out blood. What revelation? What vision of the future! Taon merely experienced a fantasy conjured up by Ylvaine's spiritual fragment! In fact, this vision of six Transcendent Messengers fighting in unison was something he frequently fantasized about himself!

With all that he knew, Ves didn't believe that Taon experienced anything divine. He had obviously been manipulated by Ylvaine's spiritual fragment. It was just that the mech pilot mistook it as a miracle due to his beliefs.

Although Ves wanted to douse Taon with the truth, he refrained from doing so. Not only would he have to reveal some very sensitive secrets, but he would likely face rejection as well.

Taon expressed a lot of confidence in what he experienced. Since the 'divine revelation' cleared away his doubts and stopped him from blaming himself, there wasn't any harm in letting him believe his prayers had been answered.

At the very least, Ves could probably count on him to pilot the Transcendent Messenger without any further drama.

As for what else Ylvaine's spiritual fragment had done in the mech pilot's mind, Ves didn't bother guessing any further.

Once the mech pilot boarded his shuttle and left the guest compound, Ves pushed the matter aside.

Instead of worrying about what Ylvaine's spiritual fragment had done to Taon, he rather preferred to think of a way to prevent it from leaving his mind again.

Unfortunately, Ves couldn't come up with a solution. The spiritual fragment was too strong for him to restrain. Much of the spiritual accumulation the holy relic used to contain had turned into its own strength.

This incident reminded Ves that spiritual fragments that belonged to other entities possessed a will of their own. It was great if they agreed with Ves, but that wasn't always the case.

The only consolation to Ves was that Ylvaine's spiritual fragment didn't exhibit any hostility to Ves. Despite his lack of belief, Ves managed to convince the spiritual fragment into empowering his mech designs by becoming their design spirit.

The cooperation between him and a spiritual fragment reminded him of his partnership with Calabast. In both cases, mutual interests ensured that both sides stuck together.

This sounded great when he dealt with a friendly or neutral spiritual fragment, but what if it was hostile?

Ves wasn't confident in his ability to control a rebellious spiritual fragment, especially if it exceeded the extraordinary threshold. His mind wasn't set up to be an effective prison for spiritual fragments.

"Maybe I need to place them somewhere else."

As a mech designer, he was used to solving problems by building something. Could he design a prison that could keep a hostile spiritual fragment in check?

"It won't work. Not unless I do more research."

Ves would have to find a material or exotic that possessed a strong restraining property against spirituality. Otherwise, he could forget about developing a spiritual prison that could operate independently.

Still, the idea had a lot of merit. With the huge variety of materials available in the galaxy, Ves strongly guessed that at least some of them restrained spirituality.

"Such a material can be put to other uses as well."

His eyes shone as he thought of the many possible applications. From shielding his mind from spiritual invasions to making himself invisible to spiritual detection methods, there was a lot he could do with such materials!

"I'll have to visit a materials wholesaler sometime!"