

Chapter 1221 Fervent Momentum

Ves quickly pushed the incident with Taon Melin to the back of his mind. After making some plans about searching for materials that reacted to spiritual energy, he turned his attention back to his work.

Some time passed until the second prototype completed its barrage of tests. This time, nobody came and stole the mech. The mech endured the last test as best as it could before it broke during the last and most arduous stress test.

The testing ground immediately disassembled the broken prototype and put it through some crushers in order to prevent anyone from reconstructing the mech. Only then did they send it out to a specialized recycling facility in order to extract its valuable materials.

Confidentiality was an important requirement for any testing ground. As the previous prototype went astray, this time the Curins made sure to handle the mech properly.

A courier brought back the data chip with all of the test data to the mech workshop. As Ves and Ketis took in the summaries, they both looked pleased.

"There are less deviations from the simulations." She said. "There aren't as many flaws either."

Ves smiled at the results. "While not all of the results are good, the second iteration is nonetheless a lot closer to completion than the first one. I don't think we have to implement too many changes to finalize the third iteration of our mech. It might even be the last one before we finish the design!"

Despite the inherent complexity of hero mechs, Ves knew his limits and hadn't incorporated any additional gimmicks in his design. The main challenge was to mitigate the severe imbalances in the mech and to make sure that both its ranged and melee combat capabilities remained in harmony.

It took a lot of effort to find the right balance. However, once he found it, he only had to make minor adjustments to keep the mech design in balance.

Everything went so well with the design process that Ves strongly considered whether he should finish his work when he completed the third iteration.

While there was always more optimization work he could do, the law of diminishing returns had already gone into effect. The more he iterated on the design, the less he was able to improve.

If Ves wanted to maintain his high quality standards, then he wanted to be a bit more assured and design a fourth iteration.

Yet that might take too much time. Adjusting the design didn't take a lot of time, but fabricating the mech and sending it over for testing ate up at least ten days.

Could he afford to delay this much? Maybe not. He reminded himself that he still needed to reserve at least two weeks to fabricate the six copies of his design.

He'd be cutting it awfully close if he delayed the completion of the design project because he wanted to develop a fourth iteration.

After weighing the costs and benefits, he decided to make his next iteration the last one. Even though it will still carry some imperfections that could have been addressed if he put more time into it, he already had another solution in store.

For the second time ever, he planned to make use of the System's Superpublish function. The comprehensive improvement it bestowed to the Transcendent Messenger should be enough to elevate it above what Ves could achieve with his optimization work.

Superpublishing came at a steep cost. In exchange for improving the overall performance of a mech by ten percent, it stopped him from earning any DP from the Transcendent Messenger.

"So what? It's not like I intend to mass produce it in the first place."

Only recently did he realize that the Superpublish function was tailor-made for custom mechs. A commission for a custom mech like the one he was currently working on would never earn him a lot of DP.

At most, he received a small lump sum of DP and a handful of DP for each copy he made.

For mech models intended for the mech market, the latter could accumulate to a frightening amount of DP. The Aurora Titan was already a good example of that as its virtual sales flooded him with Design Points before it reached a cap!

The Transcendent Messenger design would never proliferate that much. Ignoring the stolen prototype that didn't really count, only six physical copies would be made. There were no plans to publish a virtual version of the design. Any virtual versions of his design would only be made available during training simulations, which didn't earn him any DP at all.

In short, since Ves earned so little DP from the Transcendent Messenger design, he might as well Superpublish it and maximize its impact!

After he made this decision, he became a lot more relaxed. No matter how many flaws and inadequacies he missed, the Superpublish function would definitely sweep over them and smoothen out the wrinkles.

He still felt a little bad about it, though. It was as if he was running a marathon and reached the final stretch, only to step into a shuttle and blaze past the finish line without expending any further effort!

"It's a bad habit to cheat all the time."

He missed out on the problems he could have solved, thereby depriving him from the experience and lessons that he could have used to design an even better mech next time.

However, the Superpublish function was only available to him once a year. Such a frequency ensured that Ves would be forced to design plenty of mechs without the temptation that he could press a single button and level up his mech design all of a sudden.

"It's for a good cause as well."

A better mech meant he'd be able to make a greater impact with his work. The more he impressed the Ylvainans, the greater the chance he would be able to tip the momentum back to the reformers.

An entire week went by after Ves received the data chip. Together with Ketis, they processed and analyzed the data. They identified the remaining shortcomings of the mech that had become evident during the testing and addressed them as best as possible.

An invisible momentum built up in Ves. As he came closer and closer to completing the third iteration, he increasingly sensed his mech design possessed the capability to transform the Ylvaine Protectorate.

It was a ridiculous notion! How can a single mech design change the course of history of an entire state?

Yet no matter how much he tempered his expectations, each time he studied his mech design, his hopes couldn't help but inflate!

He might have been able to manage his emotions if that was all that happened, but Ylvaine's spiritual fragment made it worse!

Each time Ves envisioned how his mech design might spark a huge culture shift among the Ylvainans, the spiritual fragment radiated strong waves of faith, certainty and anticipation!

The spiritual fragment probably thought that this vision would definitely come to pass!

Although Ves had high hopes for his mech design, he didn't dare rest on his laurels at this point. A lot could still go wrong!

Yet the momentum that built up within his spirit became more and more formidable. His entire mind and spirit seemed to resonate with his design. Although that was just a figure of speech and not an actual metaphysical phenomenon, Ves couldn't help but get caught up in his growing euphoria!

A frenzy of passion and inspiration overtook his mood, and even Ketis fell to the wayside as she watched with widened eyes as Ves made a lot of small adjustments to the design.

"Is Ves always like this, Lucky?"

"Meow."

She shook her head. "You know, why am I even asking? Unlike Ves, I can't tell what you're trying to say."

"Meow."

The two of them quietly enjoyed the show as Ves frenetically perfected the design. At some point, his passion blended with his design seed and Ylvaine spiritual fragment. Three different sources mingled together and connected into one, causing Ves to enter a miraculous mood that motivated him into working even harder!

While this hyperactive inspired state didn't help him solve the problems any better, it imbued the design with a lot more spirituality! The passion he felt passed on to his mech design, elevating its meaning to a greater height!

In his state of total concentration, only a small part of his mind was aware that he had created a work of fervent passion!

It was his most passionate mech design to date!

Did this mean that his other mech designs lacked in passion? Perhaps. The circumstances of their development were different.

Ves never thought he was lacking in passion. He cared about almost all of his mech designs, especially the ones he designed for the market or for a client. As a mech designer who constantly improved, it wasn't difficult for him to maintain his love for the craft.

Yet only now did he feel as if he surpassed a new threshold in passion!

He could feel that the Transcendent Messenger transform under his ministrations despite the limited scope of his adjustments. It constantly gained more meaning as he adjusted its shape.

The weight behind the Transcendent Messenger even seemed to be on track to surpass that of the Aurora Titan!

The most remarkable trait about his famed super-medium space knight design was its exceptionally powerful design spirit. Its X-Factor was by far the strongest he had ever imparted in a mech design!

Yet if Ves stripped this asset away from the Aurora Titan, what was he left with? An overweight mech that moved extremely slowly in space and fought like a tub of lard. Its only merit was that it could absorb a lot of energy damage in the right conditions.

He realized now that the Aurora Titan would never be able to enjoy its current degree of success without its remarkably strong X-Factor. Strip that away, and the mech model would have been destined for failure!

The difference right now was that Ves didn't regard the Transcendent Messenger the same way. While hero mechs were notoriously difficult to design, his abundant knowledge, his design seed, his prior exposure to hero mechs, his latest Mastery experience and the inspiration he received from Ylvaine spiritual fragment all helped him design a great Ylvainan-style hero mech!

None of this would have been possible if he hadn't advanced to Journeyman! His design seed provided him with an enormous amount of help, bridging many gaps and accelerating the design process.

His strengthened Spirituality also helped him refine the spiritual fragment he needed to design a mech that not only conformed to the Ylvainan Faith, but embodied it to the highest degree!

Ves judged that it would be fine if he completed the design without imparting it with a design spirit! Its technical, visual and spiritual design aspects were already strong enough to make the Ylvainans speechless!

Of course, he still intended to proceed with his original plan anyway. Designing a good mech already sounded nice, but he would never miss the chance to make it even better.

"It's close. Just a few more finishing touches before I'm done." He whispered to the spiritual fragment.

At this stage, the spiritual fragment's aura had broken past the boundaries of his mind and radiated outwards.

Ketis frowned as she sensed something unusual in the air. "What's going on? Is gas leaking from somewhere?"

"Meow!"

The cat in her embrace sensed what was going on and grew excited as well! As long as Ves grew more successful, Lucky could look forward to eating better exotics!

The awareness that something unusual was happening extended to the guards and Protectors stationed at the mech workshop. They looked at Ves with amazement as they had the illusion that the great prophet had descended into the mech designer's head!

To the Protectors of the Faith, it seemed as if Ves had been overtaken by divine inspiration! He was doing the great prophet's work!

Chapter 1222 Completion

Ves looked up at the statue of Prophet Ylvaine in the chapel of the guest compound.

While exhaustion suffused his body, his mind was content.

He completed the third iteration of the Transcendent Messenger design.

Not only that, but at the final leg of the journey, he entered into an exceptional state.

His entire mind spirit synchronized with both his design seed and Ylvaine's spiritual fragment, uniting their thoughts and desires into a singular purpose.

"That is, to make the Transcendent Messenger a great mech design."

Ves could hardly understand this exceptional state. How did it come to be? Why did it come to him at the very end of the design process?

These questions and more dwelled in his mind, but there was no point obsessing over them. Inspiration followed no rules. It came and went on a whim. Certain actions and mindsets encourages the onset of inspiration, but it was not servant that could be called upon command.

The elusiveness of inspiration didn't make it any less valuable. When an artist or mech designer became inspired, their decision-making reached the pinnacle of their ability. They became hyper-focused on their work and fashioned wondrous creations without any doubt, hesitation or fear!

Ves entered inspired states before. When his passion for his design project became fiery and the stakes were high, he designed his mechs like his life depended on them! None of the mechs he designed while struck by inspiration were found lacking!

Yet his earlier state felt much greater than that. When he got caught up in putting the finishing touches on the Transcendent Messenger design, he felt unprecedentedly powerful, as if none of the limitations applied to him anymore!

It was as if he held the power in his hands to Transcendent Messenger into a mechanical god!

"Of course, that was just an illusion."

He recognized that some of his mindset had been affected by Ylvaine's spiritual fragment. Its personality exhibited absolute faith, and Ves somehow became affected by it as well. His confidence swelled and his certainty in his decisions became absolute!

Even now, when he thought back on his finished product, he was still convinced that it was the right iteration for the Transcendent Messenger.

It may not be the best or the most optimized iteration he was capable of designing, but Ves strongly felt that this was the design he should settle on. The design brought him a strong sense of fulfillment that was difficult to describe.

Perhaps the best way to describe the current state of the Transcendent Messenger as a design that radiated completion.

Some of the Protector guards stationed at the mech workshop muttered something about divine inspiration or whatever, but Ves dismissed their guesses as nonsense.

The holy sensation that struck a chord in the hearts of every Ylvainan did not originate from a god or anything. What actually happened was that the aura from Ylvaine's spiritual fragment broke through the barriers of his mind.

Even so, many of the Protectors presented regarded him like a man possessed by god after he completed the third iteration and came out of his exceptional state.

Now that he returned to the guest compound, a strange impulse compelled him to visit the quiet chapel located in the courtyard.

Although he still didn't believe in the Faith, he enjoyed the peace and tranquility that suffused the chapel. Its sober, solemn and slightly darkened interior momentarily separated him from the hustle and bustle, allowing him to descend from his high and calmly process his gains and experiences.

Perhaps the most important realization was that he shouldn't mystify his earlier state too much. While it supercharged his judgement and brought forth his full mech design potential, the truth was that he hadn't exactly exceeded his boundaries.

"Even without entering this exceptional state, I'm still able to design a great mech."

Mech design involved both art and science. What happened earlier was definitely related to the art component of mech design.

Perhaps the most valuable benefits he gained was that he managed to enhance the native X-Factor of his design and that he tweaked its aesthetics to better fit his vision.

"It is more than a mech. It's a symbol. The Transcendent Messenger is a mech that inspires faith and devotion."

Perhaps it was more appropriate to call it an idol instead, but Ves did not dare to say so. As a non-believer, he did not wish to claim that the Transcendent Messenger design was a product of a god.

"No god designed this mech! It's all me!" Ves stubbornly affirmed. "Anyone who claims that I only managed to design such a good mech should be smacked in the face!"

If a god took credit for his design, then he will kill the god! If Buddha took credit for his work, then he will butcher Buddha!

Overconfidence was bad, but so was excessive modesty. The design was mostly his work so he deserved the bulk of the credit. Ketis helped out as well. While her contributions weren't all that much, the Transcendent Messenger carried some of her influences.

"She's worthy enough to be credited as a contributing designer."

As for Prophet Ylvaine? While it was true that Ylvaine's spiritual fragment provided a lot of guidance to Ves, it mainly served as his muse. The fragment fed his creativity and issued plenty of advice and suggestions, but it wasn't actually capable of designing a mech.

Therefore, to Ves, it didn't deserve any actual credit for designing his mech. He selfishly refused to share the credit to anyone other than himself and Ketis.

The tranquil chapel quickly calmed him down. It was hard to remain agitated when its solemn interior with its judgemental statue of the robed figure of Prophet Ylvaine stared down at you from above.

As a mech designer, he understood the purpose of its interior design. This was a place for introspection. As long as anyone spent enough time inside the chapel, they would be forced to lay bare the truths buried into their minds.

"Maybe I should build something similar back at the Mech Nursery."

One of the reasons why he came here to sober himself up was because he needed to make a decision.

Should he declare an end to the design process and make the third iteration the definitive version of his design?

Logic and emotion warred against each other.

From a logical standpoint, Ves hadn't even fabricated a third prototype and subjected it to testing yet. More problems might have cropped up that still needed addressing. Perhaps a fourth prototype needed to be tested as well before the design reached an ideal state of optimization.

Yet his heart, spirit, intuition and emotion all urged him to settle for the design as is. The design may not have reached a technically perfect state, but who cared about those minor details?

It wasn't as if he was designing a mech for the mass market anyway. His only client was Calabast, who was firmly on his side.

Still, for someone who cared a lot about designing a mech to the best of his abilities, it felt like he was cutting corners at the end of the design process. He had been so meticulous in designing his mech beforehand. Why not continue the same careful approach?

"Maybe it's because the mech design doesn't need any further attention."

Ves faintly felt that if he adjusted the design too much, he risked spoiling its remarkable nature. It was a product of inspiration that incorporated many

small design nuances that he couldn't fully justify. They were products of his unconscious design instincts.

Even though he couldn't rationally explain all of his choices, he didn't feel they were wrong. Messing with them basically implied that he doubted his design ability.

His internal struggle grew more divisive as he contemplated whether he should go ahead and Superpublish his design.

Once he activated this function from the System, the Transcendent Messenger would definitely change. Ves expected many of its parameters to grow stronger as the System used knowledge that was far beyond his means to implement many improvements.

The System promised that the overall performance of any Superpublished mech would increase by ten percent. Although Ves only made use of this function once with his Crystal Lord design, he knew the System wasn't exaggerating.

The Transcendent Messenger already performed well at its current state. Improving its performance by ten percent would definitely push it to the level of mechs designed by Seniors!

Yet Ves couldn't exert any control on how the Superpublish function improved his design. It was an external aid that didn't draw on his knowledge or design style to improve the design.

Would the Transcendent Messenger still retain its essence after he Superpublished it? Or would the function dilute the qualities that turned it into such an inspirational mech?

Ves recalled what happened with the Crystal Lord. The laser rifleman mech design still held on to its identity.

Therefore, Ves guessed that even if he Superpublished Transcendent Messenger, its X-Factor shouldn't weaken.

"The problem is that I don't feel that it's the right choice."

Whenever he felt tempted to activate the Superpublish function, he became plagued with doubt. Even his intuition faintly warned him that he might regret his choice.

"Why is it so important for the mech to retain its current shape?"

Rationally, he knew it was best if he Superpublished the mech. It readily improved the performance of his mech. Yet would it still be the same Transcendent Messenger?

"Yes and no."

He wouldn't be able to acknowledge the mech as his creation anymore. He still deserved much of the credit for its design, but was it truly representative of his own design skill?

The answer to that question would be no.

While a ten percent difference sounded small, to mechs at this level, the difference was huge! Perhaps many mech insiders would guess that Ves approached a Senior or a Master in order to tune-up his mech design. They wouldn't be too far from the truth.

From an artistic standpoint, the violation was even worse. Ves had just fully invested all of his heart and mind into completing the third iteration of his mech. Each time he imagined the Transcendent Messenger, he felt proud of what he accomplished.

It would be a shame if he sacrificed his pride for convenience.

Therefore, after a very long internal struggle, he decided to listen to his heart and intuition. No matter what might result from his choice, he no longer questioned his decision now that he settled this issue.

"The third iteration of the Transcendent Messenger will be the final one."

A sense of relief suffused his body. A weight lifted off his shoulders. If he decided to go through with Superpublishing his design, then the weight might have grown heavier instead!

"Whatever. I don't know why I feel this way, but I'll enjoy it while it lasts."

Now that he settled this issue, he acted decisively. He activated his comm and called up a small projection of his design.

"It's time for you to take up your new home. Go." He whispered.

After spending months inside his mind, Ylvaine's spiritual fragment could finally depart from his mind.

The fragment seemed to be ready for this moment ever since Ves entered the chapel. It was as if it predicted the result beforehand, because the instant Ves spoke his words, the fragment immediately zipped through the hole that Ves opened up in his mental defenses!

The spiritual fragment immediately arrived at the projection of the Transcendent Messenger and seemed to phase to a different dimension. Once it entered the conceptual space of the design, it settled in and established an enduring connection!

The design grew more holy and austere in his spiritual senses. Its aura grew richer and livelier as its fundamental attributes blended with the qualities of its new design spirit, resulting in a mech that appeared sacred and inviolable!

"The Transcendent Messenger is complete!"

Chapter 1223 Courage

He began to consider what he should do next. He couldn't avoid fabricating a prototype and send it off to testing. Even though he had absolute faith in his design, as a responsible mech designer he should always verify the performance of his designs.

"It's a matter of principle. Mech designers should not deliver untested mechs to their clients."

However, while the prototype went off for testing, that didn't mean he should stay idle. He could immediately proceed with fabricating the set of six copies of the design, each exhibiting small variations in their visual and spiritual design.

It was easy for him to make cosmetic adjustments to his mechs. "I don't need to touch the contours of the mech. I can just add some variety to the tabards instead."

The white tabard added a splash of brightness over the plain gunmetal gray armor plating of his design. It didn't take much effort for him to add some color and a symbol that represented one of his six chosen virtues.

"Why does it have to be a symbol?" He scratched his chin. "Maybe it's best to be a little more straightforward and use words instead."

Symbols might convey more depth, but not everyone interpreted them the same way. The Transcendent Messenger was already suffused with so much depth that adding some clarity would help the Ylvainans make sense of his mechs.

Ever since he came up with a plan to vary the X-Factor of his copies, he thought long and hard on how to achieve this change.

He eventually decided to go through with augmenting the X-Factor of his mechs with his images.

While the images didn't have to be strong, he nonetheless wanted to empower them a little bit. For this reason, he intended to empower them with a tiny portion of his spiritual energy, just enough to make them a little more substantial.

Over the next couple of days, Ves and Ketis proceeded to fabricate the prototype first and send it off for testing. The prototype differed substantially from the last two prototypes because it fully conveyed the majesty of its X-Factor!

While nothing special happened when he completed its design, Ves nonetheless felt that the magnitude of its aura came very close to that of the Aurora Titan!

"You weren't kidding when you said the Transcendent Messenger will be as good as your previous design!" Ketis uttered in admiration as she beheld the finished mech. "It's a shame it's such a prototype. It's too precious to be wrecked!"

"Precious or not, I still need the test data to verify that it's safe and performs according to our expectations. Even if I'm assured that everything will be right, others won't necessarily take us at our word. We need hard proof that the mech is capable of delivering what we've promised."

Ves handed the prototype to the staff dispatched by the Curins. They loaded the prototype in a transport and sent it off to the same testing ground as the last time under heavy guard.

For some reason, the Protectors of the Faith dispatched three landbound mech companies and two aerial mech companies to escort the transport! That was an extremely extravagant treatment for just a single mech prototype!

Ves watched with puzzlement as the Kronons seemed to treat the prototype with twice as much care as before!

When he approached a Protector guard officer and asked what had changed, the man offered a surprising reply.

"It's simple, Mr. Larkinson. Our higher-ups have decided to raise the priority of your work. Many of us have reported back to headquarters that your mech is really something special. They must have listened and dispatched more reinforcements to make sure nothing will go wrong this time. You have to be aware that designing a better mech will alarm the extremists even more. We've already observed some irregularities in the vicinity of this mech workshop."

The Protectors of the Faith suffered several losses on Kesseling VIII. This came on top of the setbacks they suffered when they skirmishes against the border forces of the Star Faith Collective.

These high-profile failures not only shamed the Kronon Dynasty, but also called their competence into question. Failing against foreign enemies was one thing, but failing against domestic terrorists implied that they weren't good at anything!

Ves occasionally heard that the Kronon Dynasty instituted some changes behind the scenes. At the very least, they didn't take anything for granted and transferred several mech regiments to the Kesseling System.

The trouble looming over Kesseling VIII wasn't necessarily a threat to the Kronons. It was an opportunity to redeem themselves.

They wanted to fight and win. As long as they secured a single victory, they could put an end to their losing streak and reverse their declining momentum!

Naturally, the Protector officer didn't say all of this, but Ves had already heard enough analyses from Leland to know that the Protectors of the Faith were spoiling for a fight!

Ves didn't want to get caught up in any of that!

He shrugged off the conspiracy theories that crept up in his mind in favor of focusing upon the task at hand.

He was about to perform another experiment. He wanted to see if he could customize the X-Factor of his design by coloring it with a specific focus that deviated from its original vision.

Right now, the X-Factor of the Transcendent Messenger mainly conveyed Ylvaine's absolute faith. It possessed such a high degree of purity towards this sensation that Ves could hardly anything else in its X-Factor.

"It's very pure in this regard."

His previous mech designs conveyed more complex and dynamic X-Factors, so the Transcendent Messenger seemed very one-dimensional in this regard. While it looked very inspiring, it didn't fit with the aggressive mech concept of the design.

A high-impact mech should carry an aggressive X-Factor!

The Transcendent Messenger wasn't supposed to be a priest who knelt on its knees and pressed its palms together to pray in front of its opponent!

Instead, Ves wanted to portray them as holy paladins who fought for their beliefs!

In order to accomplish this effect, he came up with a simple approach. He would design his mechs with two images in mind.

The first one would be the design spirit of the mech. This was easy, as the design practically radiated its influence.

He imagined it as a clear glass of water.

At the same time, he would also hold another image in his mind that represented one of the six virtues.

The addition of this weaker image was akin to infusing the glass of water with one of six different tea flavors.

The water would still be water and retain all of its properties, but the slight tea flavor resulted in a very different taste!

While he hadn't tested out his theories, he felt confident enough about them that he didn't hesitate to put them into action.

"Courage, Justice, Perseverance, Zeal, Sacrifice, Devotion. Six virtues. Six mechs."

Ves began to start with the fabrication of Courage, the Transcendent Messenger mech that embodied this virtue.

It wasn't difficult to construct an image based on this virtue. Ves knew what courage meant and he could draw on several experiences in his life.

However, he wanted Courage to exemplify the courage within the hearts of the Ylvainans. Using his own brand of courage wouldn't be appropriate.

For this reason, he spent an hour browsing the galactic net. He references the stories, parables and myths of the Ylvainan Faith. The First Calamity and the Great Flight that happened hundreds of years ago offered many examples of Ylvainans stepping up to the plate while driven by courage.

"The Ylvainan refugees wouldn't have survived the flight to the Komodo Star Sector without courage. They never gave up or cowered against adversity."

This was the kind of inspirational courage that Ves wanted to convey in his first copy. Immersed in stories showcasing exceptional courage, Ves began to construct an abstract image that carried the essence of Ylvainan courage.

He infused it with a tiny portion of his spiritual energy, which strengthened the image by a very noticeable degree. Although Ves could have made it even stronger, he didn't believe it was necessary.

"It is only a catalyst to effect a transformation."

Only after he formed the image of courage did he proceed with fabricating the first production model of the Transcendent Messenger.

Ves was unusually solemn during the fabrication process. Ketis, who assisted his work, quickly noticed the difference as well.

"Your mood has changed." She said. "You've always been intense when you handcraft a mech, but it's different this time."

"This mech we're making right now is called Courage."

"So?"

"Don't you think a mech designer's feelings matter when they handcraft a mech?"

"We're just following the blueprint of its design." Ketis said in an uncertain tone. "Whether we're sad or happy shouldn't matter as long as our mech matches the design, right?"

"On the surface, that's true. However, I believe that the intentions and feelings of the craftsman matter. You might not be able to sense the love and passion they pour into their work, but I think that they definitely make a difference. The emphasis they put into their work can also make a difference as well, hence why I am thinking about courage while I'm designing this mech."

Ketis eventually shrugged. She had witnessed several inexplicable wonders from Ves and became used to his vague and esoteric explanations. Even if she didn't understand everything, she got the gist of it at least.

"Maybe I should try it out as well." She muttered.

Once they resumed their work, Ves indeed noticed that Ketis tried to concentrate on courage. As a former Swordmaiden, Ketis didn't need any help to come up with examples of courage.

Her efforts were very minimal, however. Not only did she lack the spiritual strength to imprint her thoughts on the mech, she also didn't clear her mind of distractions.

Although her concentration improved enormously ever since he fed her with candy, old habits died hard. Ketis was still Ketis and even when she was working, her mind still drifted off every now and then.

It took three days for Courage to take shape. When Ves finally stepped back and beheld the finished product, he was satisfied with the result. The tall hero mech with its ballistic carbine and its heavy saber felt just as strong and pure in its faith as the last prototype!

The white tabard that he synthesized from a specialized machine had been draped over the mech. Hanging from its shoulders, the cloth covered both the front and the back of the mech.

Ves placed the word COURAGE just underneath the sigils on its chest area. The bold words instantly conveyed the meaning of the mech.

There was a snag, though. He couldn't sense the aspect of Courage in its X-Factor. Whatever courage it possessed was drowned out by the Transcendent Messenger's absolute faith!

"It needs more flavor."

He began to enact his experiment and sent out the abstract image of courage from his mind. He attempted to infuse it into Courage.

Surprisingly, the image was attracted to the mech. The tiny portion of courage that Ves had already imprinted on the mech acted like a beacon that called the image home.

The empowered image blended into the X-Factor of the mech with remarkably little fanfare or complications. It complimented the absolute faith that dominated the X-Factor and began to influence it slightly.

Only now did Ves feel that Courage was worthy of its name.

During the entire process, Ketis watched Ves staring silently at the mech for several minutes while holding Lucky. She somehow sensed that Courage had changed during this time and grew suspicious.

"Is Ves a wizard or something, Lucky?"

"Meow."

"What does he even specialize in? I used to believe his design philosophy is a bunch of esoteric mumbo jumbo, but now I think he's definitely on to something. Does magic exist, you think?"

"Meow!"

Chapter 1224 Blank Canvas

Courage largely validated his guess on what would happen if he blended an additional image into the X-Factor of existing mech. His experiment to see if he could alter this aspect despite its strength was largely a success.

Ves strongly perceived the differences between Courage and the final prototype. It was like comparing a glass of water with a glass of tea. They were largely the same, but the insertion of a distinct flavor shifted Courage's emphasis.

"Too bad it's not applicable in every case." He sighed.

The reason why his weak image of courage achieved such a strong shift in emphasis was because he deliberately designed the Transcendent Messenger to be influenced in this manner.

If he wanted to achieve the same result in another mech, then he would basically have to narrow the scope of the X-Factor.

This might be fine when it came to custom mechs where he was responsible for only a handful of copies.

However, if he tried to do the same to his mass market mechs, then the overwhelming amount of copies his company sold would basically be crippled mechs. The mechs wouldn't live up to their potential because their X-Factor was incomplete!

Mechs designed for the market needed to accommodate the needs of the many rather than the few. Ves would never cripple the mech experience for 99.9999 percent of his regular customers just to make the remaining 0.0001 percent happy.

"Another issue is that the courage component is weaker than I thought."

Even if Ves empowered the abstract image of courage with a tiny portion of his precious spiritual energy, it still didn't match up against the spirituality of Ylvaine's spiritual fragment. The design spirit exerted a very strong influence on the mech.

If not for the complementary nature of the virtue of courage, the design spirit would have never allowed the image to fuse with the X-Factor of the mech!

The courage component was fragile. Whether it grew stronger or diminished into irrelevance depended on the usage of the mech and the mentality of its mech pilot.

If paired with a cautious and risk-averse mech pilot, Ves foresaw that the courage aspect of the mech would starve or even flip into cowardice!

Ves knew very well that the X-Factor of the copies of his mechs were not entirely rigid. He designed each of his mechs to accommodate changes and growth.

Mostly, this was good, as he expected the X-Factor to grow in strength after accumulating a lot of experiences.

However, not everyone grew up to be a model citizen. Many people in the galaxy degenerated into pirates.

"If people can be corrupted, mechs can be corrupted as well!"

He couldn't help but recall the first prototype. While its current design didn't match the final version of the Transcendent Messenger, it still shared a solid connection.

When Ylvaine's spiritual fragment became the design spirit of the Transcendent Messenger, did this mean the X-Factor of the first prototype grew in strength as well?

"Ah hell. I'll be damned if something like this happens!"

Due to the purity of its X-Factor, the first prototype could easily be corrupted into a black sheep of the family!

"Godamnit. What kind of depravity is my prototype suffering at the hands of the True Believers?"

This was the nature of X-Factor. The mech pilot played an integral role in the future direction of the X-Factor of their mechs.

This phenomenon was particularly strong when it came to the Transcendent Messenger. Its X-Factor basically consisted of a blank canvas of faith. Aside from the mech's devotion to Ylvaine's beliefs, it left plenty of room to accommodate other influences!

"Well, it's not like I'm responsible for what happens after I deliver my mechs."
He eventually shrugged.

Overall, Ves was content with the result of this experiment. While its technical specifications remained exactly the same as that of the prototype, its air of courage mixed in with its faith resulted in a completely different perception of the mech!

He began to tackle the remaining virtues one by one. Each time he embarked on another copy of the Transcendent Messenger, he spent a couple of hours to familiarize himself with the virtues from the perspective of the Ylvainan.

Even Ketis imitated his actions, believing that she was able to help in this area as well.

The virtue of Justice came next. It was another easy virtue for him to comprehend, he thought. Justice existed in every society.

The only complication was that the Ylvainans intersected their justice with their faith.

Was it justice to imprison an Ylvainan citizen for becoming an atheist? Was it justice to condemn a mother to death if she wanted to bring up her children as non-believers?

As a citizen from a secular state, these examples sounded extreme and anything but just. Yet from the perspective of the Ylvainans themselves, their faith was an integral role to their identity and the identity of their state.

Weakening their religion was akin to launching an attack on their distinctive culture and society!

"Justice isn't absolute." He remarked.

Ketis snorted from the seat next to him. "Justice is whatever the strongest people want it to be. The believers hold all the power in this state, hence why they are right to outlaw blasphemy and heresy."

While Ves objected to this argument, Ketis was only stating a simple truth. The one with the biggest fist set the rules. The followers of the Ylvainan Faith obtained this right as soon as they founded a state that explicitly accommodated their beliefs and nothing else.

Therefore, the Ylvainan version of justice strongly emphasized religious purity. It was fine if an Ylvainan believed in an off-kilter interpretation of Ylvaine's sayings like the Ascensionists, but dropping the faith or converting to another one was a severe act of injustice to the other Ylvainans in the Protectorate!

Maintaining religious purity among the citizens of the Ylvaine Protectorate fell within the mandate of the Ylvainan Inquisition. The splinter group of the Attendants of Ylvaine made it their holy mission to preserve the integrity of the Ylvainan Faith by hunting down blasphemers and apostates!

While many people found them scary, the inquisition actually enjoyed a lot of support among the Ylvainans! The traditionalists practically considered them as the true protectors of the faith!

As a citizen of the Bright Republic, Ves almost couldn't bring himself to adopt such an extreme perspective.

"It's hard!"

Ylvainan justice completely went against the values he had been brought up in the Bright Republic. The two were so opposed on this matter that Ves resorted to wearing the abstract image of Justice over his mind like a mask!

The instance he donned the mask, his cognitive dissonance became muted. While he still felt uncomfortable, at the very least he was able to tolerate this viewpoint.

"Urgh. I still feel like I'm betraying the Bright Republic somehow."

Ketis needed little adjustment. Though she felt very little for the Ylvainan Faith, her frontier values taught her that might was right. Fairness didn't fit in her concept of justice.

After this mixed adjustment process, the two proceeded to fabricate Justice, the second copy of the Transcendent Messenger design. Ves repeated all of the steps with Courage and managed to produce a mech that distinctly radiated a different aura!

The differences were especially stark when Justice was placed next to Courage!

While much of their auras overlapped and reinforced its other due to their common faith, they still retained their unique personalities. It was as if a young and brash warrior stood next to an old and stern inquisitor. Both of them believed in the same religion, but both of them expressed and served their faith in different ways.

"Are you sure the second mech represents justice?" Ketis asked as she admired the two mechs. "If you ask me, self-righteousness."

Ves shook his head. "Justice and self-righteousness are two sides of the same coin. What is just and what is unjust? It's not our job to answer this question. Just like any piece of art, not every mech has to provide an answer. Sometimes, raising a question is sufficient to provoke the minds of our customers."

The next virtue was a lot easier for them to adopt. Perseverance was one of the most important virtues of the Ylvainan people.

The First Calamity was an enormously damaging attack on their faith.

The Great Flight that happened afterwards tested the perseverance of the fleeing survivors.

The three leading dynasties, left leaderless after the complete annihilation of the original Ylvaine Dynasty, had to persist through many setbacks and adversities in their long trek to the edge of the galaxy!

Only by reaching the newly-opened Komodo Star Sector would the remnants of the followers of the Ylvainan Faith be able to carve out a star territory of their own!

For this reason, the Ylvainan records and historical footage contained plenty of examples of perseverance. No matter how many blows the Ylvainans suffered, they never gave up trying to find a new home for their people!

Ves became inspired by all of the stories of stoic perseverance. Their stubbornness and conviction that they needed to hold to their beliefs echoed with his heart.

Even Ketis exhibited a lot of enthusiasm for this virtue. In the past, she depended on her perseverance to last through the grueling training that every Swordmaiden was subjected to. In the present, she relied on perseverance to carry her through all of the knowledge she needed to learn in order to catch up to Ves!

Their strong affinity for perseverance therefore resulted in a smooth and enjoyable fabrication run. Ves could already tell that Perseverance was definitely his favorite copy of the series!

When Ves moved on to Zeal, he adopted a complex expression. "This is Taon Melin's mech."

The Kronon elite bore the shame of losing the first prototype. Yet when Taon visited Ves to confess his failings, Ylvaine's spiritual fragment randomly decided to invade the mech pilot's mind!

Whatever the spiritual fragment had done, Taon came out as a changed man. The abrupt shift stank of indoctrination. The only reason why Ves didn't exhibit too much alarm was because Ylvaine's spiritual fragment acted benignly.

Ever since then, Ves could feel the zeal oozing from Taon's determined eyes.

Zeal was an essential component to the Ylvainan Faith. The zeal exhibited by its most ardent followers kept the faith alive and dynamic. The traditionalists and the extremists exemplified this virtue well, perhaps too well in some cases. Yet there was no doubt that their boundless enthusiasm to dedicate themselves to the Ylvainan Faith insured that it continued to stay strong even after several centuries of persecution and self-imposed isolation!

"Aside from that, zeal always carries a special meaning to me." Ves whispered.

Zeal also happened to be closely related to passion. Whenever Ves was passionate about one of his mech designs, he expressed great zeal to turn it into a great product!

Therefore, despite the religious connotations of the word, Ves didn't find it hard to grasp this virtue.

He only needed to adopt the Ylvainan version of zeal instead of his own. Because it conflicted strongly with his Brighter upbringing, Ves found it necessary to wear the mask of Ylvainan zeal when he fabricated the mech.

He managed to complete Zeal without any further complications. In fact, Ves put extra care in its fabrication because of its intended mech pilot. Since Taon thought he could redeem himself through his zeal, then Ves wanted to accommodate his desires as much as possible!

The last two virtues he wanted to tackle were sacrifice and devotion.

"Sacrifice, huh?"

Ves entered a strange mood when his thoughts turned to this particular virtue. If he was being honest with himself, he didn't particularly exemplify this virtue. In fact, he mostly exhibited the opposite instead!

He had no qualms in admitting that he was a selfish person. Even though he rationalized his selfishness with the excuse that he often didn't have a choice, in his heart he believed that he would never voluntarily sacrifice himself for the benefit of others.

Yet was this truly the case?

"Am I truly a selfish bastard?" He whispered to himself.

"Yup!" Ketis vigorously nodded.

"Meow!"

Even Lucky agreed!

Chapter 1225 Sacrifice and Devotion

Sacrifice seemed to be an alien word for Ves, but in fact he had seen plenty of examples of this virtue.

"Remember the decisive battle against the Vesians back then?" Ves commented solemnly.

He referred to the battle between the Flagrant Vandals and Lydia's Swordmaidens against the Hostland Warriors and the Meandering Monkeys.

Ketis nodded. "Almost every mech pilot sacrificed themselves. The Silver Valencia pilots blew themselves up to give the rest of us a chance."

They failed. If not for the presence of Venerable Foster and her indestructible Belisarius expert mech, the Vandals and Swordmaidens might have stood a chance of winning. Unfortunately, the sacrifice of so many mech pilots only bought a handful of surviving support personnel some time to escape to the Starlight Megalodon.

"Even if those brave men and women died in vain, their intentions were noble." Ves noted. "They completely gave up all sense of self-preservation to give us and everyone else at the rear a chance to live and retain their freedom. Even if they are bastards and scoundrels against everyone else, they are completely willing to sacrifice themselves to save their brothers and sisters. I think that proves that even the most black-hearted pirate can exhibit altruism in the right circumstances."

"The Swordmaidens were family." She said. "We developed a sisterhood. No matter where we used to come from, once we became Swordmaidens, we all regarded each other as family."

Family. This was the pivotal word. Many people would hesitate if they were asked to sacrifice themselves to save a stranger, acquaintance or friend. Yet once it concerned family, the equation changed.

To Ves, sacrifice was intermingled with his family. The Larkinson Family as a whole sacrificed many of their mech pilots in order to uphold their duty to the Bright Republic. Several young Larkinsons had already fallen during the recent war, and several more would have died if the war hadn't ended prematurely.

Yet to him, the sacrifices of the Larkinson Family paled in comparison to that of his father.

In order to grant Ves the best opportunity of his life, his father went into exile and cut himself off from the rest of the family. The trail of his father already went cold in the vast and inscrutable Nyxian Gap, which was considered to be just as dangerous as the frontier!

A parent's love for their child was one of the strongest forces in existence. Each time Ves enjoyed success in his mech design career, he had his father

and perhaps his mother to thank for giving him this incredible opportunity in life.

Even if the gift they bestowed him came with its own issues, Ves could not deny that he wouldn't have come so far without it. While he was living a fantastic life as an exceptional mech designer, his father must be fighting for his life in the cold and unforgiving Nyxian Gap.

Thinking about his father's sacrifice reminded Ves of one of his goals in life. The reason why he worked hard to advance his career and become more prominent was because he wanted to save his father.

Without becoming powerful enough to protect himself against the threat of the insidious Five Scrolls Compact, Ves could forget about saving his father!

If he moved prematurely, he would just put himself in the crosshairs of this extremely powerful cult instead!

It frustrated him that even after five years of hard work, Ves still had a long way to go before he could save his father.

Each day that went by was another day in which his father might suffer a mishap in lawless space. The pirates and dark mercenaries of the Nyxian Gap were all known for their cutthroat ruthlessness. How could a straight-laced Larkinson like his father survive among the most ruthless degenerates in the star sector?

"If you had kids someday, you would sacrifice everything for them I think." Ketis remarked while eying him with an odd expression.

"Any parent would do so. Humanity wouldn't have reached this point if we didn't want our offspring to live a better life."

Still, having children and raising them was a distant prospect for him right now. Still, if he ever had children, he would probably shower them with as

much love as his parents once did to him. Would he sacrifice himself for their wellbeing?

Definitely.

"Let's turn our attention back to sacrifice the way the Ylvainans understand this virtue. They are willing to sacrifice themselves for more than just their family. They're willing to die for their beliefs."

Much of the early history of the Ylvainan Faith was suffused with sacrifice. Again, the First Calamity and the Great Flight offered many examples of this virtue.

Entire starships filled with refugees stayed behind to stall their hostile pursuers in order to buy time for the rest of the refugee fleet to transition into FTL!

The Great Flight was basically one huge saga that was littered with both tragedy and sacrifice!

Billions of Ylvainan worshippers died over the years as they fled to the outer reaches of the galaxy. Many of them died unwillingly, but they could have escaped this fate if they renounced their faith.

Whether they were misguided or not, Ves acknowledged their determination to hold on to their beliefs.

He possessed his own principles and beliefs, but whether he was willing to die for them was still in question.

It was better if he could avoid this choice entirely!

"I think we've developed a good understanding of sacrifice. Let's get to work."

They proceeded to fabricate the fifth copy of the Transcendent Messenger. Ves constructed the image without donning a mask because it wasn't very hard for him to imagine himself dying for his principles.

Whether he would actually do so if pushed into a corner, Ves didn't know. As long as it remained a theoretical possibility, it was easy for him to act tough in his imagination.

In any case, Ves was proud of Sacrifice when he completed the mech and infused it with the abstract image of the Ylvainan concept of Sacrifice. It took on a solemn holiness as if it had made peace with itself.

The Sacrifice was the most grave and serious mech of the series.

Whereas the other five copies of the Transcendent Messenger pursued victory, Sacrifice focused mainly on staving off total defeat.

"It's really different from the rest." Ketis remarked as the five finished mechs stood side by side. "The other mechs offer a ray of sunshine while Sacrifice looks like it has already brought an umbrella to block the rain."

"Each mech represents a different aspect of the Ylvainan Faith. Despite its despondent nature, Sacrifice is the most noble of the six."

While each mech exhibited their unique points, the main feature of the hero mech design had always been its ability to inspire faith! A horrible accumulation of faith had gathered in the section of the workshop where they temporarily stored their mechs.

The five finished Transcendent Messengers each reinforced each other's auras.

Aside from reinforcing their common faith, Ves discovered to his surprise that the different virtues also resonated with each other!

This was a completely unexpected development!

Courage reinforced Sacrifice. Perseverance reinforced Justice. Justice reinforced Zeal!

This was just a handful of the web of connections between the five mechs!
Each virtue mutually reinforced the other virtues!

Their common foundation based on their absolute faith in Ylvaine's beliefs paved the way for this intricate and fascinating interaction.

If five mechs already resulted in such a complicated web, then adding another one would surely be even better!

"Let's move on to Devotion."

Ves considered this to be the virtue that tied the Ylvainan Faith together. Prophet Ylvaine managed to convert many different people to his beliefs during his lifetime.

He possessed a quality that inspired devotion in everyone!

Devotion lay at the heart of every religion, and the Ylvainan Faith was no different. Despite its weird and eclectic beliefs, the faith had always managed to unite its worshippers under a single banner due to the enduring devotion it roused!

"Becoming devoted to a faith is more than paying lip service to its rituals and beliefs." He stated. "You need to be sincere and surrender yourself to something greater than yourself."

He witnessed many people dedicating their entire lives to their faith. The worshippers of Haatumak and the Cursed and Blessed People of Aeon Corona VII all devoted much if not all of their time in service to their gods.

It was something very alien to someone like Ves. Even if a higher existence akin to a god was truly out there, why should Ves devote his life to such a being?

If a god demanded his devotion, then Ves better get something in return!

Other people may be content with freely giving away their devotion, but that was wasteful to the extreme! Devotion was a scarce good, and that meant that it should come with a price!

"Devotion is just a nice way of describing blind fanaticism." Ketis critically remarked.

Ketis showed a lot of nonchalance towards devotion due to her experiences in the frontier. She recalled the depravities that many extreme cults got away with by indoctrinating their worshippers into mindless sheep.

"There are both good and bad connotations to devotion." Ves replied, not entirely agreeing with her stance. "Sure, in many cases it's taken advantage of, but devotion also helps many people find their meaning in life."

Humanity's enduring entanglement with religion even after they advanced to the stars showed that devotion was an intricate part of their civilization. In fact, many aliens also exhibited a varying propensity towards devotion, proving that devotion was something that transcended race!

Despite his mixed views towards devotion, the Ylvainans were relatively benign their devotion to their faith.

The Ylvainan Faith was not a closed-off entity that demanded their worship while giving only scraps in return.

The faith intertwined itself in the lives of every Ylvainan. It stayed relevant outside the church. As the state religion of the Protectorate, the Ylvainan Faith was present in every school, every store, every street and so on. Even the mech community wasn't exempt from this pervasiveness!

"The entire Ylvaine Protectorate is devoted to the faith!"

This was an example of devotion to the highest extent!

Ves ran with these concepts of devotion and embarked on fabricating the final Transcendent Messenger of the series. He repeated many of the same steps and finished the mech in less than three days.

Once infused with the image of the last virtue that remained, the mech called Devotion fully came into its own!

As loaders placed the newly-fabricated mechs next to its siblings, an awe-inspiring sight came into being.

Ves, Ketis, Lucky and all the Protectors of the Faith that stood guard in the mech workshop couldn't help but stop and stare at the collection of mechs.

"Courage. Justice. Perseverance. Zeal. Sacrifice. Devotion." Ves recited the names affixed on their tabards. "Six virtues. One mech model. All united for a single cause."

The insertion of Devotion resulted in a qualitative difference in his perception of the mechs. Although it only sparked a minor increase into the common foundation of their auras, the addition of this latest virtue amplified the interconnectedness of every virtue!

Ves couldn't help but describe what he saw. "Devotion is the glue that binds the virtues! None of the other virtues can exist without devotion!"

The auras of all six mechs constantly pulsed and shifted as the virtues constantly sparked against each other. Each of the mechs seemed so sacred and divine that a number of Protector guards spontaneously lost control and bent to their knees in prayer!

"I can feel it! These mechs are the works of Ylvaine!"

"Not even the grand cathedral is as majestic as this sight! These mechs are divinely touched!"

"We have witnessed a miracle in the making!"

The abnormal behavior of the normally-stoic Kronon guards proved that Ves had succeeded! All of the risks he took had been worth it if he could accomplish such an exceptional emotional response from the Ylvainans!

Just as Ves basked in the glory and satisfaction of producing a profoundly compelling series of hero mechs, the doors leading into the mech workshop slammed open!

Ves and some of the other Protectors instantly turned around and saw that a delegation of inquisitors had arrived without announcement!

High Inquisitor Xefin Lin Poxco strode forward with strong and determined steps despite his advanced age. He ignored the mechs entirely and focused his burning eyes solely on his target.

"Your Excellency, to what do we owe your visit?" Ves guardedly asked as he abruptly came off his high of completing his goal.

"You are under arrest, Mr. Larkinson! We have proof that you are involved with stealing the holy relic from the Grand Cathedral of Ylvaine's Mercy!"

What?! Ves widened his eyes! How did they find out!?

"In addition to that, your efforts in designing these deceptive mechs in order to corrupt our beliefs is blasphemy! This reason is enough to take you away!"

What kind of excuse was that?!

Chapter 1226 Sacrilege

The high inquisitor was completely serious when he charged Ves with the crimes of sacrilege and blasphemy!

Even if the latter stood on shaky grounds, the former was already serious enough to condemn him to death!

His status as a foreigner and a guest to the state wouldn't protect him from the death penalty in case the Ylvainan Inquisition found him guilty. Any foreigner

and non-believer who voluntarily entered a religious state implicitly or explicitly accepted their house rules!

If foreigners objected to these unfair rules based on religious rather than legal grounds, then they shouldn't have visited the state in the first place!

Therefore, even if his status as a de facto Journeyman afforded Ves some protection, he could not count on the MTA to bail him out of his own stupidity!

The inquisition didn't target him this time due to his status as a mech designer. Instead, they approached him as a faithless foreigner who nefariously wanted to damage the religious institutions of the Ylvaine Protectorate!

Ves grimaced as he stared right back at High Inquisitor Poxco's glowing eyes. He was reminded of the Ylvainan spin of justice, and how it could easily go astray.

He learned enough about the Ylvainan Inquisition that nothing good would happen once they took someone into custody. Almost no one escaped punishment once they fell into their clutches as they were very effective in extracting 'confessions' out of their captives.

As long as Ves ended up in their dungeons, he would definitely undergo a lot of torture in order to force out all of the secrets he possessed!

This was completely unacceptable to him! Nevermind stealing the holy relic and whatever else the Ylvainans accused him of. If he was forced to reveal his deeper secrets, then that would definitely spell the end of him and his entire family!

Seconds passed as Ves contemplated a way to avoid falling into the custody of the inquisition.

"Does Director Cecily Curin know of this?" He asked.

"She knows." The high inquisitor smirked. "I'm afraid that there is nothing she can do against the magnitude of the charges arrayed against you. The proof we've gathered has given us sufficient grounds to take you away. Will you surrender to us peacefully or are you going to launch a last-ditch attempt to escape?"

Ves knew his chances of escaping was extremely miniscule. Xefin Lin Poxco came highly-prepared this time. Not only did he bring five well-prepared junior inquisitors, but he also brought along over thirty guards who were loyal to the inquisition!

It was impossible for him to eliminate them all with a single blast of his Amastendira. The forces of the inquisition weren't stupid enough to clump together and had already spread out over the entire workshop. Not only did they cover every angle, they also sealed every possible exit.

Even if Ves somehow overcame the entire inquisition, who knew how many infantry and mechs of the inquisition waited outside the mech workshop!

Ves glanced towards the Protector guards. Many of them wore full-face helmets, but those who exposed their faces showed obvious hesitance. They weren't on the inquisition's side, but neither did they have the obligation to defend Ves against their persecution.

As for the Avatars of Myth, while they came with a handful of mechs, they would never be able to survive once they opened fire. That would make them enemies of the entire planet, star system and state! There was no way they could get away with helping Ves resist arrest!

The grimace on his face deepened as he realized he possessed very few options to extricate himself from the inquisition. The Sparous Vize and the Rising Red Dragon were still in the hands of the Protector guards, so Ves and

Ketis wouldn't be able to suit up before the Inquisition forces peppered their bodies with rounds and laser beams.

Perhaps the only reasonable way he could escape this predicament was by activating his Full Stealth augment on his System comm. As long as he sneaked out of the mech workshop and entered the city, he'd be able to switch to his Privacy Shield and remain out of sight of electronic surveillance while he escaped further.

Yet this was still not an ideal solution. As long as he resisted arrest, both the Ylvainan Inquisition and the Protectors of the Faith were compelled to hunt him down no matter the cost. Ves would find no safe haven on the planet and trying to smuggle himself out of the star system was incredibly difficult!

More than that, resisting arrest would also invalidate everything he worked for during this business trip!

How could he abandon his goals just when he was so close to making them come into fruition? He already completed the mechs he set out to design and produce! He just needed to hand them over to Madame Cecily or the Curins in order for them to showcase the foreign-designed mechs in public!

The high inquisitor coughed. "As much as it amuses me to see you denying your guilt, we don't have all day. We have a missing relic to return and you are our primary suspect."

Time was almost up. Just as Ves blinked to Lucky in order to help him with his escape, another group of Ylvainans entered the workshop!

"STOP, Your Excellency!" Calabast shouted in her identity as Madame Cecily! "While it is within your right to charge Mr. Larkinson with sacrilege and blasphemy, the Curins will not allow the inquisition to obtain sole custody of the accused! No matter the proof you've gathered, he is an esteemed guest of

the Protectorate, and the handling of his case must proceed with utmost fairness!"

"What is the meaning of this interruption?" High Inquisitor Poxco frowned. "Your presence here changes nothing. The law is on our side."

Calabast offered a smile. "That may be true, but the Attendants of Ylvaine have been persuaded to take a lighter hand in this case. I believe you should get in touch with your superiors."

The high inquisitor frowned deeper but followed her suggestion. A minute later, he looked angry.

"Director Cecily! What is the meaning of this!? What bribes did you Curins offer to stay our hand?!"

"It's not just us who object to the rough treatment you have in store for the accused." She spoke. "The Kronons have expressed an interest in treating Mr. Larkinsons fairly as well."

Ves turned his attention to the Protector guard captain who stood at the side. He seemed to be holding a private comm call with his superiors. After the call ended, the man stepped forward.

"Director Cecily is correct. I have been informed that the Kronon Dynasty wishes to ensure that Mr. Larkinson is to be treated with dignity and respect!"

The underlying meaning was obvious. Both the Curin and Kronon Dynasty threw their support behind Ves. While the Ylvainan Inquisition could still ignore their objections due to the severity of the accusations they brought forward, their own mother organizations reined them in! High Inquisitor Poxco just learned that he lost much of his power!

"Let us discuss what will happen with Mr. Larkinson and his work while he is taken into custody." Calabast suggested.

The three representatives of the three leading dynasties gathered together to hash out the messy situation. Ves tried to listen in but Calabast had already activated her signal jammer.

Five minutes later, the three separated. Xefin Lin Poxco looked as if his entire day had been ruined as he turned his attention back to his target.

"Mr. Larkinson. Please come with us. You will be taken to a secure villa that is jointly guarded by the Ylvainan Inquisition and the Protectors of the Faith. There, you will wait until your case is brought up to the local tribunal."

Ves looked at Calabast, who nodded. "It's okay. The Protectors of the Faith will make sure that nothing will go amiss."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure. Trust me on this. The inquisition aren't allowed to bring out their thumb screws while you're in custody. Just surrender quietly and don't give them a reason to curtail the privileges I've secured for you at great cost."

This compromise solution sounded a lot better than ending up in the sole custody of the inquisition.

"Very well, director. I will trust you this once."

Upon High Inquisitor Poxco's nod, the junior inquisitors stepped forward and strip-searched Ves. Their hands and their sensors swept over his business attire, sniffing out his comm and the handful of tools and gadgets he stuffed in his pockets.

Once they became assured that Ves no longer carried anything on his body but his clothes, they shackled his wrists together with solid manacles made out of compressed alloy.

The Ylvainan Inquisition really didn't want Ves to escape!

A handful of Protector guards joined the inquisitors as they calmly escorted their captive to their shuttle.

As Ves was being guided out of the workshop, he turned around and saw to his relief that Ketis and Lucky had been entirely neglected during this whole spat.

Calabast stood close to Ketis and whispered some words to her. Ves counted on the spy to keep the younger woman safe and out of the reach of the inquisition.

The shuttle took him to a guarded villa in the outskirts of Krent. Ves saw a couple of mechs bearing the colors and markings of the Inquisition surrounding the entire site.

Mechs dispatched by the Kronon Dynasty were also arriving. They walked in from several directions and seemed to crowd out the mechs of the inquisition!

With the Protectors of the Faith out in strength, the Ylvainan Inquisition wouldn't dare act improperly!

As Ves settled inside the plain and largely-empty villa, he waited for someone to give him an explanation. A few hours passed by until Calabast arrived at the villa and managed to force the inquisition to allow her to meet with the captive.

"You're in a lot of trouble, Ves." She said while raising her finger in a strange gesture.

The gesture warned him that the entire villa was under constant monitoring. Everything they said and every reaction or fluctuation in their bodies would be scrutinized by the inquisition. They would definitely use the evidence they gathered to reinforce their accusations!

Understanding this, Ves decided to don the image of innocence as his mask. Although it wasn't flawless, at least it suppressed his unconscious body language from giving away his guilt.

"I'm innocent!" He said emphatically. "Whatever the inquisition accuses me of, it's false!"

"I know." Calabast lied. "You were nowhere close to the grand cathedral while the relic went missing. However, the Ylvainan Inquisition claim that even if you haven't yanked the relic from the grand cathedral, they are convinced that you are definitely related to the theft."

"What is their proof?" He asked.

"In order to justify your arrest to the Curins and Kronons, the Ylvainan Inquisition has revealed they have found microscopic particles that used to be part of the holy relic during a routine search of your room at the guest compound. The particles they found underwent multiple lab tests owned by different factions. Each of them have matched the particles to the nutrient pack wrapper that went missing."

Damnit! Ves didn't think the inquisition would snoop around in his room so thoroughly! Even though Lucky ate the entire holy relic, some minute portions must have spilled out of his mouth or something!

Next time, Lucky should close his mouth while he chewed! And he should also use a plate while eating! Letting remnants of his food spill onto the floor was bad hygiene!

Ves maintained his innocent act. "I don't know where those particles came from, madame. For all I know, someone or something sneaked into my room and dropped a few crumbs. I'm being framed!"

"I believe you, but proving that will be difficult. You should be aware that this is the first clue we've found that could lead us back to the missing relic! Many

Ylvainans will side with the inquisition, giving them ample support for them to find you guilty regardless of the questions we raise in front of the upcoming tribunal!"

In other words, regardless of whether the proof was adequate or not, the inquisition could still condemn Ves as long as they had the public on their side!

Chapter 1227 Three Judges

According to Calabast's take on the situation, the Ylvainan Inquisition came up with a plan to neutralize the opposition from the Curins and the Kronons.

The two leading dynasties both stood behind Ves and ensured his safety. Yet they were only able to lend their support to a foreigner so long as their core interests weren't at stake.

The three leading dynasties jointly ruled the Ylvaine Protectorate for centuries without falling out, but that didn't mean they lived in harmony with each other. Each of them emphasized a different vision of Ylvainan society.

Of the three dynasties, the Poxcos were the most fervent in their faith. This meant that even as the other two dynasties slowly drifted towards the reform agenda, the Attendants of Ylvaine firmly remained in the camp of the traditionalists.

Logically speaking, for a splinter organization of the Poxcos to preside over Ves' case was highly improper. The inquisition implicitly stood up for the interests of the Poxco interpretation of the Ylvainan Faith, which basically meant that they were highly inclined towards the traditionalists!

It was too bad that much of the Ylvaine Protectorate didn't care about the inherent conflict of interest in the inquisition. As long as they found sufficient 'evidence', they could accuse anyone of damaging the interests of the Ylvainan Faith and sentence them to death!

Normally, this should have been a real cause for concern, but the Ylvainan Inquisition acted with a considerable amount of restraint most of the time. It also helped that they showed a lot more care when accusing a Curin or a Kronon of a crime.

This was also the reason why Ves had been moved to a villa instead of a cramped cell. The backing of the Curins and the Kronons was crucial to his safety while he was under house arrest!

"It's because of the backing of both the Curins and the Kronons that your tribunal will also proceed more fairly than is usually the case when the Inquisition charges someone with a crime." Calabast emphasized. "Ordinarily, three judges from the inquisition will preside over your case, which is very bad because they rarely acquit the accused who have been put forward."

Ostensibly, the inquisition only charged a heretic or blasphemer with a crime when they gathered sufficient evidence to determine their guilt.

Ves was very skeptical of this explanation. He was more inclined to believe that the inherent conflict of interest within the inquisition turned their tribunals into show trials!

He could already see the result if he was being brought up in front of High Inquisitor Poxco's own colleagues!

Fortunately, Calabast offered a ray of sunshine to him. "You don't have to be afraid that the tribunal will rubber stamp the high inquisitor's charges. Now that both the Curins and Kronons have butted in, the Ylvainan Inquisition has been forced to take a step backwards. Only one of the judges is an inquisitor. The Curins have dispatched a respected judge from Kesseling VIII's highest court. The Kronons on their part have put one of their military judges forward as the third member of the tribunal."

"How are these other two judges inclined towards my case?"

"In the interest of fairness, the Curins and Kronons have dispatched what they consider the fairest judges they can push forward in a short timeframe. Both of the judges I've mentioned have excellent records. Personally, I think the high court judge dispatched by our dynasty will be the most sympathetic to your predicament. The military judge sent by the Kronons won't be as friendly, but will definitely be the most objective and impartial out of the three judges."

"In other words, the military judge will likely be the swing vote. My acquittal will hinge on his judgement."

While Ves had been surprised with the support he received from the Kronons, they were known for their integrity. Even if some of their higher ups liked him, they wouldn't bend the rules just for his sake.

This raised his curiosity of what happened earlier. "Why did the Kronons back me up at the mech workshop?"

"They like your mechs." Calabast replied. "The Transcendent Messengers that you've finished have made quite a splash among the hierarchy of the Protectors."

That was a very welcome piece of news, though it probably wasn't enough to sway the military judge they assigned to his case.

"So what happens now, madame?"

"The Curins have already prepared a team of lawyers to handle your case. They'll make the necessary preparations and will represent you in front of the tribunal that is scheduled to start after a week. The Inquisition always moves fast, so we don't have a lot of time to prepare your defense."

"A week?! That's way too fast!"

"That's the inquisition for you. They're completely different from the Protectorate's civil, criminal and military court system." Calabast sighed.

The Ylvainans were still very backwards in a lot of matters!

"So what do you think of my chances at the upcoming tribunal?" He asked.

"Not good. The problem is that the Ylvainan Inquisition has already started to rally public opinion against you. While that doesn't directly affect your trial, their true goal is to erode the protection that the Curins and Kronons are currently providing to you. With all the hysteria that ensued when the holy relic went missing, many Ylvainans are deeply indignant that it hasn't been returned after several months."

"So even if I'm innocent, as long as the entire public is convinced that I'm culprit behind the theft, the Curins and Kronons won't support me anymore?"

"While I can state with confidence that the Curins won't change their minds, the Kronons might not be so inclined. They have always considered themselves to be guardians. If they see that public indignation towards you has exceeded a certain point, then they'll realize that the only way to return peace to the Protectorate is if they bring forth a scapegoat who can satisfy the Ylvainan desire for retribution."

"And that means?"

"If the Kronons swing over to the side of the Poxcos, the Ylvainan Inquisition will have enough power to run their tribunal in any way they see fit! Instead of presenting your case in front of three different judges, you'll instead be dealing with three inquisitors who hold the power of life and death in their hands!"

Obviously, that was a really bad outcome for Ves! His guilt would practically be a given if the situation had reached that point!

As Ves tried to figure out a way out of his predicament, he noted something important.

"If we want to avoid the worst-case scenario, we need public opinion on our side, right?"

"Right."

"Why not show off the Transcendent Messengers? You were at the mech workshop earlier today. You saw how fantastic they were, right?"

"You did not disappoint in that area." Calabast replied flatly. "Yet I'm not sure whether that matters at this point."

"Why not?"

"Because the second charge the Ylvainan Inquisition has arrayed against you is blasphemy. They are essentially accusing you of profaning the great prophet and our entire faith by developing corrupting mechs!"

"What kind of nonsense charge is that?!" Ves angrily burst out. "Just look at my mechs! They're far more sacred than even the most piously-designed Ylvainan mechs! There is not a single blasphemous aspect about them even if you disassemble them into individual parts and use a deep scanner to scour their entire makeup!"

"I agree with you on this. This charge is on very shaky grounds. However, don't think the Ylvainan Inquisition is throwing this accusation at you for no reason. By presenting your mechs as a threat to the Ylvainan Faith, they have the right to lock down your mechs and destroy them on the spot!"

"What?! My mechs are innocent!"

"Whoah there, Ves! It hasn't come to that point!" Calabast raised her palm in an attempt to calm him down. "The Protectors of the Faith are aware of the value of the Transcendent Messengers. With their help, we managed to force the inquisition to move the mechs to a depot for storage while the trial is underway. However, this is probably what the Ylvainan Inquisition tried to

accomplish in the first place. As long as they can force your mechs to remain under lock and key, we can't make use of them to influence public opinion."

Even if the argument for accusing Ves of blasphemy was nonsense and would definitely be dismissed in a fair trial, the goal of the inquisition had already been met. The six Transcendent Messengers would not be able to make use of their extraordinary X-Factor to charm the Ylvainans into supporting Ves and the reform agenda.

"What a dirty trick! This kind of manipulation would never happen in the Bright Republic!"

Calabast ruefully shook his head. "I'm not so sure. Shenanigans happen in every state no matter how clean they appear to be. Even your Bright Republic isn't exempt from miscarriages of justice."

"Yeah, but at least that happens behind closed doors. Your inquisition on the other hand is too brazen with their manipulation! It's obvious that they already decided to crucify me! How is that just?!"

"There's no use lamenting over the flaws of our justice system. This is the way the Protectorate has always been run. It's tradition."

Ah yes. Tradition.

Ves scoffed. "Alright, I get it. So if my mechs are locked up, what can we do? Can you instruct some mech companies to fabricate some copies of the Transcendent Messenger?"

"That won't work. The blasphemy charge not only targets the six finished mechs, but also their design. No mech company is allowed to use a design while their purity is in question. Only when the tribunal acquits your design of blasphemy will we be able to use it, but by then you'll already be executed!"

The inquisition truly prepared well this time! Ves had always felt weird about them when High Inquisitor Poxco dropped by for a chat a few months earlier. He expected the inquisition to follow up with another visit, but they had laid low all this time until Ves practically finished the commission!

"Okay, so now what?"

"I'm already working on the problem of public opinion." She spoke. "While the Ylvainan Inquisition has blindsided us with their sudden moves, the Protectorate is not their playground. The highest elders of the Curin Dynasty are very aware of your significance. We will do our best to hinder the inquisition from swaying the entire Protectorate."

Although she maintained a lot of confidence, Ves wasn't entirely sure the Curins would be able to prevent the Ylvainans from becoming outraged at him. He wasn't exactly the most likable person in the state due to his status as a foreigner.

"Anything else?"

"We are trying lots of different solutions. Your upcoming case is anything but a foregone conclusion." Calabast encouragingly said. "I know it's frustrating that you aren't able to do anything while you're in custody, but you are not without friends."

That reminded him of the people he left behind. "Are the others okay?"

"They're fine. The inquisition hasn't targeted them because they're not as consequential as you. Just to be certain, your staff and your Avatars of Myth are all confined at the guest compound."

That was good news to Ves. This meant that Lucky should be free to sneak around.

"Okay. Please keep protecting them. Even if the tribunal sentences me to death despite my innocence, I don't want to drag down my friends." Ves said with relief. "One more thing. Is the tribunal public or private?"

"They always take place behind closed doors. Because of the abhorrent charges arrayed against the accused, the inquisition doesn't want to expose the average Ylvainans to lurid stories."

"Is there any way you can convince the trial to go public?"

"No. The Ylvainan Inquisition has never publicized their tribunals. It's simply not done."

"Well, this isn't a regular tribunal. Since the Curins and Kronons managed to force the Poxcos to accept their judges, why can't they force out this concession as well?"

This put Calabast to thought. "It's possible, but you'll need a good reason."

"I want some parity. Since the inquisition has turned towards the court of public opinion, shouldn't I have an opportunity to defend myself at that very same court? Making the trial public will also ensure that it will proceed fairly. I think this should be enough of a reason to make an exception for me. I'm sure the Ylvainan public will be glad to witness the trial of someone who is accused of stealing their holy relic."

"That.. might actually work!"

Chapter 1228 Faithless Foreigner

A few days went by as Ves remained under house arrest under the watchful eyes of the Protectors of the Faith and the Ylvainan Inquisition.

He didn't dare do anything funny such as pulling out his System comm from his Inventory because such acts were far too conspicuous.

After meeting with the lawyers that Calabast assigned to him, Ves understood that aside from guiding him through the formalities, they weren't very helpful.

"If Calsie was here, she'd probably suffer a stroke when she sees how awful the Ylvainan Inquisition conducts their trials." Gavin noted during his visit to the villa. It took a lot of effort to grant him permission to meet with Ves in the first place. "The inquisitors who drag people to trial have already judged them guilty. The tribunal is just a safeguard in case the evidence brought forth is too flimsy to pass the smell test. In practice, the inquisitors on the tribunal almost always side with the inquisitors who accuses someone of damaging the Ylvainan Faith."

Ves nodded. "I've read up on their history. The inquisition and their kangaroo court is a relic of the First Calamity and the Great Flight. Back when the Ylvainan Faith was under constant attack, the fleeing refugees suffered many betrayals from their fellow Ylvainans. While there are many devout believers among their number, some of them weren't as eager to die for their beliefs. While plenty of cowards renounced their faith and fled from the refugee fleets, a small number of them stabbed the Ylvainans in the back by sabotaging the ships or passing on information to their pursuers."

"Traitors need to be dealt with quickly."

"Yup. With how desperate the Ylvainans were trying to flee those star sectors, they couldn't afford to hold proper trials. That is when the Ylvainan Inquisition came into being. They received a strong mandate to protect the Ylvainan Faith by rooting out traitors by any means necessary. And to their credit, they were remarkably effective, mostly due to the broad range of power at their disposal."

"And that has hardly changed after they settled down in the Komodo Star Sector." Gavin noted.

"The Poxco Dynasty turned the inquisition into their militant arm after the founding of the Protectorate. With such solid backing, the other factions in the state failed to diminish the power of the inquisition even after they were no longer as necessary as before."

This resulted in an anachronism that was the Ylvainan Inquisition. The conservative, tradition-bound citizens of the Protectorate really disliked rapid changes. Institutions dominated by the traditionalists virtually remained the same even after several centuries had passed!

"How is public opinion shaping up, Benny?" Ves asked.

He didn't have access to the galactic net during his house arrest. He became completely dependent on others for outside news.

"Well, as we predicted, the traditionalist media outlets have turned most Ylvainans against you." Gavin shook his head. "The citizens of the Kesseling System are particularly furious at you. The holy relic that went missing is one of their most valuable cultural treasures. With the proof the inquisition has presented, the public is pretty much convinced you're the mastermind!"

"Because I'm a faithless foreigner, right?" Ves asked sarcastically.

"The Ylvainans can't imagine that one of their own would dare to desecrate the great prophet's possessions. It's much easier for them to believe that a foreigner who has no respect for their faith is responsible instead."

This was what the Ylvainan Inquisition wanted to publicize. As long as they succeeded in demonising Ves, the Curins and Kronons wouldn't be able to back him up anymore.

However, the court of public opinion was a double-edged sword. In the right circumstances, the monster that the inquisition had unleashed might very well turn against their benefactor!

Ves smirked. "Have we succeeded in shifting public opinion."

"We have. The Curin Dynasty did everything possible to stoke the public into demanding the tribunal proceedings be made public. Even if most Ylvainans are indignant at you, the Curins took advantage of their fury by channeling that into demanding that your trial be broadcasted live! Right now, the inquisition is still sticking to their guns, but we expect they'll cave within a day."

"Hehehe." Ves deviously chuckled. "Since the Inquisition tried so hard to turn my trial into a witch hunt, we might as well run with it and blow it out of proportion!"

Both of them saw a lot of advantages to shining a light on the usually murky tribunals of the inquisition.

While Ves cared more about the opportunity to present his case to the public, Gavin and the others on his side realized another advantage to holding the trial in public.

A smile appeared on Gavin's face. "Now that the tribunal is on track on becoming public, the Ylvainan Inquisition can't pull off their usual shenanigans. All their other tribunals took place behind closed doors, so they easily got away with any irregularities and miscarriages of justice. Together with replacing two of their inquisitors with real judges, your trial will probably be the fairest the Ylvainan Inquisition has ever held in their history!"

"That doesn't necessarily mean I'll be able to walk away, though." Ves sighed. "The 'evidence' they presented is extremely compelling."

Gavin dropped his smile. "That's true. The microscopic particles they found in your room have been verified more than a dozen times. They even matched it with samples taken from similar nutrient pack wrappers that the Attendants of

Ylvaine kept in their collection. All of the findings point out that the particles definitely belong to the holy relic taken from the grand cathedral."

"I'm innocent!" Ves exclaimed for the umpteenth time! He was constantly wearing his mask of innocence during his stay in the villa. He wanted everyone who monitored his life signs to receive the impression that he wasn't involved. "Why in the galaxy would I want to steal a nutrient pack wrapper of all things? I can get millions of them by ordering a container worth of nutrient packs!"

"The relic that went missing isn't a normal nutrient pack wrapper."

"Nutrient packs should at least contain their original contents in order to be collectible." Ves peevishly muttered.

He still found it ridiculous that a worthless object turned into a priceless cultural heirloom because it used to belong to a great figure.

Yet Ves shouldn't complain. He took advantage of the Ylvainan propensity to worship every object that was tangibly related to Prophet Ylvaine in order to refine a powerful spiritual fragment.

Not that he saw anything wrong with that right now. He was innocent!

While Ves and Gavin didn't discuss their defense strategy because the inquisition was listening in on their conversation, they both knew that their chances weren't great.

Three judges decided Ves' fate. One of them was a Curin and would likely be on his side. The other one was an inquisitor who would definitely side with High Inquisitor Xefin Lin Poxco.

Therefore, the only judge that mattered was the military judge sent by the Kronons.

While Ves and his lawyers intended to cast a lot of doubt on the evidence the inquisition had gathered from his room, just yelling at everyone that he was being framed likely wouldn't be enough.

The entire guest compound was under constant monitoring. Hardly anyone could have sneaked in to drop a few particles in order to frame Ves of a crime he didn't commit.

There was a very big chance that the military judge might side with the inquisition due to the weight of this evidence!

This was also why Ves didn't put his faith in his lawyers and the legal proceedings. No matter how much they leveled the playing field, the inquisition were old hands at this. Their meticulous and extensive preparations prior to taking him into custody proved that they weren't complacent.

For this reason, Ves wanted to flip the table and make a personal appeal to the public.

"How are the rest holding up so far, Benny?" He idly asked.

"I've been in touch with the LMC, but they can't really do anything on their end. Leland has been more helpful to us. He managed to get the Ministry of Foreign Affairs involved. The Bright Republic's embassy in the Protectorate has already stood up on your behalf. It's only..."

"They don't have any power in the Protectorate." Ves summed up. "The Ylvainans don't regard foreigners very highly, and their long-standing isolation hasn't helped the Bright Republic establish a strong presence in this state."

Most Ylvainans really couldn't care less about what the Bright Republic thought of their treatment of Ves. So long it became clear that Ves deliberately desecrated one of their great prophet's relics, they couldn't wait to tear him to pieces!

If the tribunal found him guilty and sentenced him to the only penalty in consideration for such a grave violation, then Ves didn't intend to put his head on the chopping block.

If this worst-case scenario came to pass, Ves would instantly be ready to summon both his System comm and the Amastendira.

His Inventory was one thing the Ylvainans weren't able to rob from him. With these two objects, Ves stood a decent chance at fighting or sneaking his way out of the tribunal.

He could count on Lucky to help bail him out as well. Ves hadn't seen his cat ever since he was taken into custody, but there was no way that Lucky would stay on the sidelines.

Still, once he used these means to escape captivity, it was hard to put the genie back in the bottle. Not only that, but he'd also be making an enemy out of the entire Protectorate and vindicate the Ylvainan Inquisition that he posed a threat to their state.

The staff he brought along would also suffer. Ves knew very well that the reason why Ketis, Gavin, Leland and the Avatars of Myth remained stuck on Kesseling VIII was because the inquisition implicitly treated them as hostages.

As long as Ves behaved, the inquisition didn't have an excuse to target his staff.

Still, if it came down to it, Ves would definitely take action to preserve his own life regardless of the repercussions of his actions.

He really didn't want to be forced into that corner, though. Until the situation had reached that point, he would do his best to escape from his predicament.

"Has there been any news about my mechs?"

"The Curins are doing all they can to get your mechs out of the depot. It hasn't worked. Surprisingly, the Kronons lent their support behind the Curins. They're pretty adamant about releasing the Transcendent Messengers to their rightful owner."

"Unlike the Poxcos, the Kronons appreciate my mechs." Ves smiled. "Support from the military will be very helpful in counterbalancing the Poxcos."

"It's not enough, though. Even if the Kronons are apparently huge fans of your mech, the inquisition hasn't made an exception to its rules this time. They're really determined to keep your Transcendent Messengers buried."

Ves knew that his six hero mechs were fantastic enough to sway public opinion. Sadly, the inquisition knew that as well and became incredibly obstinate about keeping them out of sight so they wouldn't 'corrupt' more Ylvainans.

"Since the Protectors of the Faith are well-inclined towards my mechs, have they offered any other support?"

"Plenty, but mainly by ensuring that the tribunal will proceed as fair as possible. To the Kronons, designing a great mech does not excuse the theft of a holy relic. The higher ups want the truth to come out so that they can admire your mechs without feeling any guilt."

"That sounds fair enough."

The support from the Kronons had been critical in restraining the inquisition. The Curins alone wouldn't have been able to stop the inquisition from acting with impunity.

In a way, Ves liked the Kronons the most due to their honesty. Even if the Curins were on his side, Ves didn't like the way they bent the rules and played favorites. He much preferred to be treated fairly.

"It's too bad that fairness appears to be a foreign concept in the Protectorate."

Chapter 1229 The Tribunal

The Ylvainan Inquisition initially planned to hold their tribunal in some dark and underground facility. However, that changed when they were forced to make a lot of concessions in order to ensure the trial could proceed fairly.

For this reason, the trial took place at Kesseling VIII's high court. While the venue was situated in the heart of Krent, the wide-open plazas and avenues around the court building offered enough space for an entire mech regiment.

The Protectors of the Faith came out in force this time. Not only did they assign an entire mech regiment around the court, they also deployed many other units in the neighboring districts. They took security so seriously that they evacuated all of the surrounding buildings beforehand!

The Ylvainan Inquisition deployed their own mechs and troops, but their numbers paled in comparison. They were only there to show the flag at this point.

Ves exited the shuttle with his hands free but his arms held in place by two heavily-armored Protectors. His guards didn't think Ves would be able to pull off anything by himself, so they skipped the manacles this time.

That was good news for him. If his hands were shackles while he attempted to escape, it would have been much harder for him to do so if he was restrained!

No crowd of protestors stood outside to jeer at Ves while he was being guided into the court building.

However, once he entered the courtroom sometime later, the people sitting in the gallery immediately jeered at the foreigner!

"Foreign devil! Your end has come!"

"Blasphemer!"

"Return our relic!"

All of the Ylvainans in the gallery were local citizens. Many of them even lived in this very city and possessed a deep sense of ownership towards the holy relic that resided in the grand cathedral.

Since the tribunal had to be public, the inquisition insisted on an audience. The reactions of the crowd served as a useful backdrop to condemn Ves for his alleged crimes against the Ylvainan Faith.

Ves inwardly smirked. The live broadcasts were already useful. Having an entire gallery of people just a stone's throw away from the counsel table.

As he took his seat, his counsel attempted to advise him on how to conduct himself, but Ves dismissively waved his hand.

"It's too late for that." He said. "We've already prepared as best we could in the limited time available."

His attorney was a slick-haired high flier in the service of the Curins. He was one of their best lawyers on their payroll, but the tribunal being held right now was something very new!

To even call this proceeding a trial was a mockery of the word. Only a couple of hours determined the life and death of Ves. He would either be able to walk out of the courtyard as a free man or sneak out after causing a lot of mayhem and confusion.

Either way, he was determined to get out one way or another.

After a bit of delay, the judges finally entered the courtroom. They took their places at the bench, which had been modified to accommodate the tribunal.

Sitting to the left was Judge Okin Fillis, the high court judge who was in the pocket of the Curins. Despite his allegiance to the Shepherds of the Flock, he didn't carry the Curin surname, which lent some credibility to his impartiality.

While the average Ylvainan didn't know any better, anyone in power would easily see that Judge Fillis would definitely acquit Ves as long as there was even a scrap of doubt.

Sitting to the right was High Inquisitor Kelly Ixef Poxco. She was a middle-aged woman with a severe face that looked as if it could scare ghosts to death.

Ves knew it would take a miracle for High Inquisitor Ixef to disagree with her fellow inquisitor.

Perhaps even many average Ylvainans didn't believe she would side with Ves. And that was okay! Ves was the great blasphemer and devil! He deserved to be condemned by the inquisition!

Therefore, even if she was partial towards the prosecution during the trial, no one cared. She merely had to adopt a neutral facade in order to maintain the dignity of the inquisition during the broadcasts.

Perhaps deliberately arranged to sit in the center was the only true neutral judge worth mentioning.

Lieutenant Colonel Kelber Kronon differed from the other two judges by his direct connection to the main branch of the Kronon Dynasty. This esteemed pedigree afforded him a lot of respect. As a main branch member of the Kronon Dynasty, he was definitely instilled with all of their core values.

Every Ylvainan placed a lot of expectations on the main branch members of the family.

While they received a lot of privileges and could easily obtain a cushy job, the expectations on them were high.

Those who failed to live up to their family names would be withdrawn from their positions and be sent somewhere far away so that their failure wouldn't stain their dynasties!

Obviously, Judge Kelber Kronon shouldn't be one of them. The old man gazed at the surroundings with evident irritation.

He struck the gavel on the bench. While this simple act only released a single striking sound, it also activated a hidden command. The courtroom exerted an invisible wave of pressure on the gallery, forcing many of them into silence.

While they could still talk, none of them dared to do so at this moment.

"The tribunal is in session." Judge Kronon declared.

What happened next pretty much ran on autopilot as far as Ves was concerned. The only people who spoke out were the judges, his counsel and a very familiar high inquisitor.

Xefin Lin Poxco wore his hood down this time to present an amiable face to the gallery and the broadcasts. He presented the key evidence that tied Ves to the theft of the holy relic with excruciating detail.

"As you can see from the conclusions of over fifteen lab results, the microscopic particles we've found in Mr. Larkinson's accommodations are definitely related to the missing holy relic!"

"Analysis of surface debris attached to the particles revealed that some of them are unique to the environment of the shrine at the grand cathedral."

"Radiation analysis..."

"Frequent jamming and signal blocking..."

On and on, the high inquisitor elaborated on how thoroughly the inquisition had analysed the particles they found in Ves' room.

Almost an hour into his spiel, Xefin Lin Poxco presented his most egregious finding!

"After extensive analysis by some of our best forensic scientists, we have concluded that these particles had only spilled onto the floor of Mr. Larkinson's room for one reason. If our worst fears are right, then it is likely that he has destroyed the holy relic in his possession! There is no other explanation for these particles to separate from the main body of the relic!"

"SACRILEGE!"

"DEFILER!"

"You are Ylvaine's worst nightmare!"

Ves pressed his lips and ignored the outrage from the gallery. The people who were hurling insults and abuse at him were just a tiny sample of the countless number of Ylvainans who were echoing these thoughts from their homes!

He had to hand it to the high inquisitor. He sure knew how to rile up the crowd. The high inquisitor was pretty much addressing the gallery from the start, knowing that public opinion was the most important variable in this unprecedentedly public tribunal.

Judge Kelber Kronon didn't want the proceedings to turn into a circus, though, so he quickly struck the gavel and forced everyone to pipe down.

Aside from presenting an excruciating analysis on the evidence the inquisition had gathered on what had happened to the holy relic, the high inquisitor also spent some time on disparaging Ves' mechs.

"Look upon the face of this foreigner." High Inquisitor Poxco theatrically swept his hand towards Ves. "Despite his seemingly harmless facade, there is only greed and malice in his heart! This black-hearted mech designer is the vanguard of an invasion of foreigners who are determined to destroy our

Ylvainan way of life and to hollow out our faith! His motives couldn't be any clearer when he designed his blasphemous mechs for the Curins!"

A noisy and distorted projection of the Transcendent Messenger design came into view. The projection was so hazy and messed up that none of its majesty and X-Factor could be felt!

Ves' counsel stood up. "Objection! This projection is not an accurate depiction of my client's work!"

"Overruled." High Inquisitor Kelly Ixef Poxco immediately stated. "Projections of objectionable materials are regularly censored in order to protect everyone from viewing obscene material."

Ves gripped his hands into fists. How dare this biddy call his mech design obscene! If not for being put on trial, he would have punched her in the face for insulting his work!

Xefin Lin Poxco continued as if he already expected this result. "The so-called 'Transcendent Messenger' is a travesty of a mech design! You can already tell its blasphemous purpose from its name! Calling his creation by that name is an indirect way of claiming that these mechs are a higher incarnation of Prophet Ylvaine!"

Gasps of shocks emanated from the crowd.

"Think about what this means!" Xefin yelled. "Mr. Larkinson is essentially alluding to us that the great prophet lives on as his mech design! That is a bald-faced mockery of our faith and our belief that Prophet Ylvaine has reincarnated elsewhere in the galaxy or already transcended to a higher state ahead of time!"

The crowd grew more and more outraged as the high inquisitor painted the meaning of the mech in the worst possible light.

"Perhaps Mr. Larkinson is misguided. Perhaps he concedes that the great prophet may have reincarnated after his death. Yet his answer to this mystery is that Prophet Ylvaine has reincarnated into a lifeless mech design! Either he has the biggest misunderstanding of our beliefs, or he thinks he can use our prophet for commercial gain!"

The outrage that erupted forced the judges to call the gallery in order! Even after multiple waves of pressure engulfed the onlookers, their rage hadn't subsided!

While the judges were able to employ a more drastic measure to mute the voices, they were reluctant to do so.

Eventually, the excitement died down as High Inquisitor Xefin Lin Poxco raised his palm. This indicated that his control over the gallery exceeded that of the judges!

"Brothers and sisters of the faith, the fate of the Protectorate is at stake. The great deceiver who sits there is but the first among many. There are thousands more nefarious mech designers like him in the Bright Republic and countless more in the rest of the star sector. In their boundless greed for power and wealth, they will not hesitate to profane our faith like Mr. Larkinson had done in order to sell their mechs! We must slam the door in the face before they barge into our holy state and butcher our beliefs!"

Although it should have been highly inappropriate to veer into politics, it was still allowed. Tribunals often dealt with cases which had the potential to upset the entire Ylvainan Faith.

In a way, the high inquisitor was correct. Ves did wish to sell more mechs and open up the Protectorate. Yet his intentions weren't as malicious as Xefin Lin Poxco described.

Ves firmly believed that his business dealings with the Protectorate had always been mutually beneficial! Even though the traditionalists had the most to lose, the rest of the state would definitely be able to enjoy a lot of prosperity as they caught up to the rest of the galaxy!

Unfortunately, no one believed him right now. The picture that High Inquisitor Poxco painted was remarkably similar to the nonsensical accusations the True Believers yelled at Ves at the Grand Church of the Grey Martyr.

This only worsened his impression of the Ylvainan Inquisition. The high inquisitor went too far in painting Ves as a blasphemer and a devil!

Ves became increasingly more dour. His eyes burned as he bottled up his fury. Right now wasn't the time for him to strike.

Chapter 1230 Flawed Mask

Ketis, Leland, Gavin and Melkor all sat in one of the living rooms of the guest compound. Their eyes glued onto the huge projection that depicted the tribunal proceedings in lifelike detail.

The four of them would have preferred to be present in the gallery themselves, but the Protectors of the Faith denied their requests.

In this volatile time, it was better for the associates of the accused to stay put!

For this reason, the people that Ves brought to the Protectorate had no choice but root for Ves at a fair distance from the court building.

"What a blowhard!" Ketis yelled. "How can this old inquisitor come up with so many lies and exaggerations? They're all false! Ves would never be so disrespectful to the Ylvainans! He has always treated their beliefs with respect!"

The defense did attempt to fight back against High Inquisitor Xefin Lin Poxco's lurid characterization of Ves. They brought forth numerous witnesses, from Leon to various Protector guards, and had them state their impressions.

Overall, the witnesses all had something good to say about Ves and his mechs. The Protector guards especially showered Ves with praise.

"Even if he's a foreigner, he has always acted as a model guest in our state." One of the Protector captains said without reservation. "While I cannot make any judgement of Mr. Larkinson's moral character, his conduct and his work has never posed any threat to our faith. In fact, his mechs has reinforced my belief and every other Protector who enjoyed the privilege of witnessing his creations in person!"

All the positive character witnesses helped counteract some of the bad impression against Ves, but that did not change the public's determination that he had likely defiled their holy relic!

This crime alone was so severe that almost no Ylvainan citizen wanted Ves to walk free from the court right now!

Gavin looked around the room for a moment. "Where's Lucky, Ketis?"

The woman shrugged. "Beats me. Lucky has been in an awful mood ever since the inquisition took Ves away."

"This is a volatile time for him to be running free. What if he's racing across the city to reunite with his owner?"

"Don't worry, Gavin. Lucky is smart enough to know what he can and can't do." Ketis confidently stated.

All of them were used to Lucky coming and going, so they didn't worry too much about where the mischievous cat went. In fact, Ketis even thought it might be good for Lucky to go to the courtyard.

So far, the trial was not going well for Ves. As Ves continued to sit quietly while his counsel did all of the talking on his behalf, he discreetly observed everyone's attitudes with his spiritual senses.

The gallery was easy to read. Most of them wore their emotions on their sleeves.

Some of the Ylvainans were slightly different, though. Ves sensed a lot of calculation when he brushes his spiritual senses against their intangible minds. This signified that they were plants who had deliberately been placed in the gallery to incite the others.

Of course, as much as the people in the gallery loathed Ves, they only indirectly affected the verdict.

The real decision makers sat behind the bench. Judge Okin Fillis remained passive and inscrutable throughout the tribunal session, presenting the illusion that he was detached and therefore impartial.

Only the sheep were fooled by the Curin judge's act. Everyone else knew that Judge Fillis would definitely acquit Ves as instructed by the elders of the Curin Dynasty.

High Inquisitor Kelly Ixef Poxco presented a reasonable front as a judge. That didn't mean she came off very sincere in her act. Ves could sense the seething hatred underneath her skin. She shared the same intensity against Ves as High Inquisitor Xefin Lin Poxco!

Only Kelber Kronon remained calm, both outwardly and inwardly. He listened to the high inquisitor with a critical mind as the man painted Ves as a great deceiver.

It was as if the judge could smell all the nonsense that the prosecution was flinging towards Ves.

Still, Ves sensed that though the Kronon judge didn't like the inquisition and how they ran their tribunals, Kelber didn't regard the defendant fondly either.

The hard evidence that Xefin Lin Poxco presented was extremely compelling. Several Protector guards stationed at the guest compound have also testified that nothing funny went on as the inquisition arrived and conducted their inspections.

All of this meant that Kelber became inclined to believe that Ves was indeed involved with the theft of the holy relic. The military judge even became swayed by the possibility that Ves destroyed the relic!

This was a very serious charge that spoke to his heart! Kelber could hardly keep his calm when he contemplated that Ves might have done something so severe!

Ves inwardly shook his head. He shouldn't have been surprised by the worsening sentiment against him. Even though he was completely innocent of whatever the inquisition accused him of, his defense had little recourse to fight back.

While it was possible that someone may have framed Ves, the defense did not present any evidence to support this argument. Casting doubt on the origin of the microscopic particles basically amounted to a conspiracy theory which the Kronon judge didn't take very seriously.

The tribunal already lasted several hours and the time for arguments was about to come to a close. At this point, everything had been brought up. There was very little chance that the defense could say anything that could change the minds of the judges.

This was bad, Ves realized. Judge Okin Fillis may be on his side, but he needed the support of at least one other judge.

Yet Judge Kelber Kronon, his only potential savior, felt more inclined to support High Inquisitor Xefin Lin Poxco than acquit Ves of the charges!

Ves couldn't say he expected anything different. The evidence to support the first charge was too solid.

Was the worst-case scenario about to happen? As soon as the tribunal issued their verdict, Ves would definitely move into action.

While he hadn't seen any sign of Lucky, he knew him well enough that his cat should be ready to help in his own way.

That wasn't all.

With how much Calabast knew about Ves, she would definitely do everything in her power to save him from the inquisition. Ves didn't know how much resources she could bring to bear in order to save his life, but she was definitely hiding something under her sleeve.

As for Flashlight or the Bright Republic, Ves didn't put much hope in their help. Their influence was minimal in the Protectorate.

Even though it seemed that Ves wasn't alone, he still didn't want to resort to this option. There was still a chance he could save his hide without burning all of his bridges.

As the two sides prattled on and on, Ves closed his eyes and concentrated his mind.

He had restrained his fury and his spirituality throughout the entire tribunal so far.

He let everyone else say their piece while he kept his mouth shut.

He let High Inquisitor Xefin Lin Poxco take advantage of the trial by espousing his traditionalist political agenda in front of the entire Protectorate.

"Now it's my turn." He whispered to himself.

Although he had been divested of his ordinary comm, he could still call up his impression of his designs in his mind. As the lead designer of the Transcendent Messenger, there was no way he forgot its contours and its design specifications.

A true mech designer could always recall their mech designs by heart!

Right now, Ves did so by projecting the Transcendent Messenger design in his mind. He vividly recalled all of its lines and curves and technical specifications. As Ves created an accurate image of the Transcendent Messenger design in his mind, he pressed his mind to it, seeking an even deeper connection.

The mask of innocence he donned for the entire week was becoming a hindrance. Therefore, he decisively shed it from his mind, allowing himself to establish an unobstructed connection to the image of the Transcendent Messenger.

Eventually, he managed to commune with the design spirit of the Transcendent Messenger. Just because Ylvaine's spiritual fragment had moved out of his mind didn't mean it was gone forever!

Ves guessed that he was able to communicate with the design spirits of his finished mechs, and he was right. He managed to establish a distant and shallow connection to what used to be Ylvaine's spiritual fragment.

He mentally communicated to the design spirit.

"I need your help."

A pulse of doubt flowed across the connection.

"There are Ylvainans who are maligning me and the design you are inhabiting in. If this goes on, I'll be declared guilty and the Transcendent Messenger will be tarnished as well."

Another uncertain pulse flowed from their connection.

"Do you know what that means? The Ylvainans will turn against the Transcendent Messenger! The Inquisition will not only outlaw the design, but also destroy all of the mechs derived from it! Your existence will become meaningless!"

This time, the design spirit transmitted an alarmed pulse.

"Help me! Lend me your power so I can teach these Ylvainans what their great prophet truly wants! Lead these lost sheep back to the flock!"

A small moment passed as Ves waited for the design spirit to digest his words. After thirty seconds of silence, Ves finally perceived a reaction from the connection.

"Ahg!" Ves held his head as a sudden headache spiked in his mind.

Ylvaine's spiritual fragment decided to respond for his call to help by temporarily shuttling out of the Transcendent Messenger! It forcefully squeezed its way through the narrow connection until it emerged back into Ves' mind!

Immediately upon arrival, Ves mentally transmitted his intentions to the fragment, and it only hesitated for a short moment before agreeing with the plan.

Ves was about to do something he had never done before.

He was donning the spiritual fragment like a mask.

It was dangerous, it was stupid, but it was the most effective solution he could think of. How better to confront the devout Ylvainans by doing so while embodying a part that used to belong to the prophet? It was brilliant!

The fusion between his mind and the fragment was anything but easy. The spiritual fragment was far more powerful than any image he had previously

donned as a mask. The only reason why the fusion managed to take place at all was because both of them had lowered all of their defenses and actively wanted to merge!

Various unknown and incompatible thoughts, emotions and other impulses flooded his mind! The spiritual fragment was way too energetic! It was corroding his mind and impacting his design seed!

Yet despite all of the strain, Ves tried his best to resonate with the spiritual fragment. It was hard. They were two completely different individuals. Ves had to force the process until something akin to a partial fusion took place!

When Ves next opened his eyes, his eyes seemed to glow. He lowered most of the barriers in his mind, allowing the strong spiritual fragment to radiate its sacred aura in full glory!

"ENOUGH!" He boomed.

This forced High Inquisitor Xefin Lin Poxco to shut up.

Everyone else sat rooted in silence as they turned their attention from the inquisitor to Ves. Somehow, he appeared much different all of a sudden!

Ves stood up. "This farce has gone long enough!"

"Please sit down, Mr. Larkinson." High Inquisitor Kelly Ixef Poxco warned from the bench. "You are speaking out of turn!"

"It is you who are speaking out of turn, Your Excellency!" Ves boldly declared. "All of you here have been carried away by this travesty of a tribunal that goes directly against your great prophet's will!"

Ves amped up the spiritual fragment's aura, causing everyone present to regard him completely differently! The aura was so strong that it even transcended distance as the broadcasts conveyed a fraction of it to the viewers watching the tribunal proceedings at home!

When he determined he caught everyone's attention, he released a shocking declaration.

"Let's get the truth out of the way. The crime that High Inquisitor Xefin Lin Poxco accuses me of? I'm guilty! I planned the theft! I obtained the nutrient pack wrapper that you consider as a relic! I held it in my hands moments before I had it destroyed!"

The entire gallery gasped in shock at the bold admission! Even the three judges couldn't help but lose their composure for a moment!

"Has Ves Larkinson gone mad?!"