

### **Chapter 1301 Role Model**

While his visit to Zin Alpha III had been an eye-opener, Ves did not enjoy his visit very much. The pathetic degree of complacency among the locals really depressed him. The Kamoners eschewed mechs as much as possible. They didn't even make use of display mechs whose only purpose was to look impressive and imposing for their owners!

He did not regret the visit, though. The Kamon Republic's complacency and dependency on a superior state for protection opened his eyes to how blind a state could be when they forget they lived in a hostile universe.

"Even the Friday Coalition has enemies. There are also the masses of alien races that are hungering to regain the territories humanity stole."

Even if humanity maintained a long period of relative peace, it had never truly ceased fighting against the aliens. Both sides simply opted to have a strategic break in order to reorganize their civilizations and rebuild their depleted forces.

To lose the edge that the human race had developed during the Age of Conquest did not seem wise to Ves.

"Centuries have passed since Kamon has last fought a serious conflict." He scoffed.

Ves had a feeling that the MTA and CFA didn't like to see this either. This was probably why they did not try very hard to stop human infighting. As long as states kept fighting against each other, they continued to remain in fighting shape.

That might not seem important now, but if the alien races ever decided to launch a counterattack, then most human states would be ready to resist!

As Ves returned to the Barracuda that currently orbited Zin Alpha III, he met a curious Gavin.

"Did you have fun on the surface?"

"Not as much." Ves shook his head. "Kamon's mech culture is on life support."

"This place is different from the Bright Republic. They never had to contend against the equivalent of the Vesia Kingdom. While they share an uncomfortable border with the Hexadric Hegemony, it's beneath the second-rate state's notice to invade the Kamon Republic."

"Well, I have seen everything there is to see. I'm dying to visit the Kinner Tribe. They're a lot more desperate. It'll be interesting to see how resilient the Kinnners turn out to be compared to the Kamoners."

"Before you retire, we received a comm request from a new contact." Gavin informed him. "We aren't sure whether you wanted to talk to him, so we kept him on hold until you returned."

"Oh? Who wants to call me? Is it one of the mech designers on the list? Have any of them changed their minds?"

"No.. it's a more significant figure. A Journeyman called Tristan Wesseling wanted to speak with you directly. As far as we could gather, he's a direct disciple of Master Katzenberg of the Carnegie Group. I'm not sure whether it's wise for us to engage in conversation with him considering your current relationship with the Coalition."

Ah. Ves hadn't been able to talk to Tristan after the end of the trials at the Pit. The Rim Guardians booted him out of their clubhouse first.

Though Master Olson formally cut off his connections to the Friday Coalition, Ves did not hold any animosity against them. It would be nice to Ves to talk to a mech designer he considered to be a peer.

"It's fine. He's an acquaintance from Centerpoint. Accept the comm request and route the call to my stateroom if he's available."

"If that is what you want. I'll contact him and see if he's available."

As soon as Ves entered his stateroom and hung up his shawl while throwing Lucky in the air.

"Meow!"

As Lucky scrabbled for stability in the air, the compartment's projectors came to life. The familiar form of Tristan came into view.

"Ves."

"Tristan."

Both of them studied each other for a moment.

"You don't look like a Hexer lover. Did you seduce Miss Wodin or did she seduce you?"

"It's complicated. I used a matchmaking service and they thought it was a good idea for me to meet with her. As for what ensued, all I can say is that Gloriana is intense."

"Miss Wodin is one of the most eccentric Hexer mech designers to have emerged in recent times. She only works on custom mechs, you know."

"I'm aware. I don't mind this limitation. Sometimes one excellent mech is more valuable than a million normal mechs."

"You misunderstand." Tristan shook his head. "I didn't mean to suggest that Miss Wodin's design philosophy is a detriment. In fact, it's the opposite. Aren't you aware, Ves?"

Though Ves hadn't thought about it before, Tristan's prompting quickly reminded him of a very important aspect about custom mechs. "Designing

custom mechs for regular mech pilots is just the start. The best custom mechs are those tailored for expert pilots and higher!"

At this point, Gloriana advanced fairly recently. As an inexperienced Journeyman, she lacked the qualifications to become involved in the development of expert mechs.

Yet soon a time would come where she progressed far enough to receive the acknowledgement of the Seniors or Masters in charge of the development of expert mechs!

As a contributing designer, Gloriana could bring a lot to the table as long as her design philosophy didn't clash with the other designers involved in the project.

Once she contributed to a number of successful expert mech designs, by the time she advanced to Senior, she would definitely be able to head an expert mech project as its lead designer!

And for good reason! A mech designer who foreswore designing mass-produced mechs and focused solely on custom mechs to the point of basing her design philosophy around it would definitely be able to excel in this aspect!

An ordinary mech designer with a more normal design philosophy simply couldn't compete against her in this area!

Others were already aware of her potential in this field. This must be why the MTA favored her. Even if her hopes of advancing to Master was low, her design philosophy already added a lot of value at the Senior level!

"Miss Wodin is a very desirable mech designer. She rejected a lot of suitors, you know." Tristan remarked. "It's very surprising that she settled for a Brighter of all mech designers."

"Because of her potential to design fantastic expert mechs?"

"Yup. Many influences are eying her ability to take expert mechs to the next level. An effective performance boost of five percent or ten percent is extremely significant at high-level combat. It's enough to drastically swing the outcome of battles between expert mechs!"

Ves hadn't fully thought about Gloriana's significance. It turned out that she was quite the hot potato!

"Does this mean I'm in danger or something?"

"Miss Wodin has already claimed you as hers. If anyone touches you, it's an affront to the Wodin Dynasty. They'll be forced to respond, causing the Hegemony to enter into turmoil. No one wants to see that happen."

That did not sound very reassuring to Ves. Although Ves likely wouldn't face any open attacks, that did not rule out dirtier means of eliminating him. He had plenty of experience with assassination attempts!

Ves rubbed his face. He was exasperated. "Thanks for the warning, Tristan. I'll be sure to make the right precautions."

"No problem." Tristan smiled. "Anything for a fellow mech designer. Personally, I dislike mech designers who engage in dirty dealings. They have no honor. If they want to steal Miss Wodin away from you, they should challenge you in public!"

"I'm grateful for your vote of confidence." Ves ruefully smiled. "I have to ask, why are you still so friendly to me? I'm no longer Master Olson's apprentice. I've even been kicked out of the Clifford Society!"

"We're mech designers." Tristan emphatically stated and spread his arms. "Fridayman, Hexer, Brighter, those are just labels. Even if we will face each other on opposite sides one day, that will not affect my respect for you. Your

performance during the trials thoroughly proved you're worthy of my regard. Trust me, I have a good eye for that!"

In other words, Tristan believed that Ves would rise high one day and wanted to make sure there would still be a connection between them if that happened.

This was a very calculated decision on the part of Tristan. Master Katzenberg's apprentice was very keen on building up a network with notable and promising mech designers, and didn't mind if some of them belonged to the opposite side!

Such an open-minded and far-sighted approach to establishing connections drew a lot of admiration from Ves. He should take a page out of Tristan's book!

"Well, if you don't mind becoming friends with me, I'm okay with staying in touch." Ves smiled.

Both of them implicitly understood the underlying truth behind their relationship. Each of them saw value in maintaining a friendly connection with each other. The moment one of them died or became worthless, their friendship was as good as dead.

This was the nature of friendship based on mutual interest. Ves should know, since he already forged a more comprehensive pact with Calabast.

After both understood each other's intent, they began to settle down and chat. Ves took the opportunity to ask what Tristan heard about Gloriana on Centerpoint.

"So she basically went to a bunch of public venues, most of them frequented by fellow mech designers, and bragged about her new 'boyfriend'?"

"Yup. she wasn't even subtle about it at all." Tristan nodded. "She crowed your name out loud whenever there was an opening in a conversation. Since a lot of influences are keeping track of her, the news spread rapidly."

Hearing this prompted Ves to conclude that Gloriana acted very deliberately to spread news of her new relationship. This was a woman who knew what she wanted and wasn't afraid to take decisive action!

"What do you think?" Ves curiously asked.

"I haven't heard much about Miss Wodin, other than that she's very picky and demanding. While you're definitely lucky to have her as a girlfriend, she's definitely a high-maintenance girl, if you know what I mean."

Ves chuckled. "I'm very much aware of that possibility."

"Seriously though, you're very lucky to have found a girlfriend who matches with your personality and your design philosophy. Some mech designers have little choice but to pair up with people who only fulfil one or the other. There is nothing wrong with mech designers marrying people who aren't mech designers or whose design philosophies don't match, but it's wasted potential."

"As for mech designers who marry to advance their design philosophies rather than out of love, their lives are probably less fulfilling than others." Ves added.

"They can get quite dysfunctional." Tristan agreed. "Mech designers at our level and higher are all good enough to receive galactic citizenship. When two of our kind disagree with each other but are forced to make nice just because their design philosophies work well with each other, all kinds of ugly situations occur behind closed doors."

Ves read the implicit message behind this example. It was a warning to him that he should take care to never reach this point with Gloriana!

That reminded him of something. "By the way, have you heard of a fellow Brighter mech designer of mine by the name of Patricia Schneider?"

"Master Null's apprentice? She's quite an intriguing mech designer. She does remarkable work with heavy mechs and she's been involved in several design projects led by Lyri Reywind."

"I'm interested to hear how she's doing. She's a former classmate of mine. How is she doing?"

"She's been doing quite well for an immigrant. I heard she recently got married. I missed her wedding as I was already on Centerpoint."

"Do you know who she married?"

"Just some Leemar graduate. As far as I know, he's just an Apprentice." Tristan replied dismissively. "I think they both married for practical reasons rather than for love. Miss Schneider needed inside access to the Friday Coalition, and the only way to do that was to marry one of our domestic mech designers."

"Are you sure that's the case?" Ves asked huskily.

He was stunned by this revelation!

"The man she chose is a nobody, Ves. The lucky fellow hasn't caught the attention of any Masters. He likely lacked the confidence to make it anywhere in the mech industry. For this reason, he probably agreed to marry Patricia because she's apprenticed to a Master and therefore a better mech designer. Her chances of advancing to Journeyman is a lot higher, and if her relationship with Master Null is as close as the rumors suggest, then reaching Senior is not out of reach."

Ves entered into a slightly turbulent mood. After Patricia told him that she was about to marry, he stopped inquiring any further into her situation.



Although getting closer access to the Friday Coalition definitely played a part, he long thought that she truly married for love!

### Chapter 1302 Class Angs

Ves quickly calmed down after he heard Tristan describe Patricia's marriage.

Though he felt uncomfortable about her decisions, Patricia was her own woman. It was fully within her right to marry any man she wanted. For her to marry some random Apprentice Mech Designer who graduated from Leemar was her prerogative.

Why should he care so much about the man she chose to spend the rest of her life with? It was none of his business. Ves had his own relationships to deal with. He could hardly spare any attention to Patricia's circumstances, especially since it became even unlikelier they would ever cross paths in the future.

Both sides got something out of each other so Ves could hardly fault the practicality of the pairing.

Still, Ves expected that Patricia would marry someone better.

"I've heard rumors that Master Null favors Patricia a lot." Tristan continued. "If he isn't so insistent on hiding his identity in order to avoid his old enemies, he might have even taken Patricia in as his direct disciple. Hearing from you that she's your former classmate, that doesn't surprise me anymore. Where the hell did the two of you even study to become this good?"

"Just an average institution in the Bright Republic. The two of us are just abnormal." Ves shrugged. "It's not important. I'm just happy to hear that Patricia is finding success in her own way. I hope she doesn't take too long to advance to Journeyman."

Ves noticed that ever since he became a Journeyman himself, his perspective on Apprentices and lower had shifted. He hung out more with other

Journeyman who all regarded Apprentices as kids with relatively little importance and took over their attitude.

As someone who only recently crawled out of the ranks of Apprentices, a part of him felt offended by this treatment. Yet as a Journeyman himself, unrealized potential was still unrealized.

They still had to pass the extraordinary threshold in order to gain notice. This was quite hard for most Apprentices. Compounding the situation was that mech designers did not have an equivalent rank to expert candidates in the mech piloting profession.

Expert candidates only possessed a fraction of the potential of expert pilots. However, their emergence proved that a particular mech pilot possessed a definite potential to become someone greater, and thus could always count on enjoying better treatment and much more investment in their training.

Not so for Apprentices. Most only had a vague clue of how far they progressed, and no one took their judgement seriously.

After a bit of chatting, Tristan passed on one more remark before he ended the call.

"Don't neglect the Rim Guardians. Even if they're often bullied by the other Mechers, they are still one of the most well-equipped organizations in the galactic rim. They have access to tech, exotics, treatments and other goodies far beyond any local power. Best of all, they're quite willing to share in their bounty to their allies as long as they're helpful in some way."

Ves sighed. "I know. Thanks for the reminder. The problem is that it's not so easy to earn their favor."

"The best things are always the hardest to get. You should be grateful that you even have a chance at all due to passing the trials set by the Rim Guardians."

The call quickly ended after that. As Tristan's projection winked out, Ves digested what he learned.

He scratched his chin. "Tristan's conduct is already that of a mech designer ready to strike it out on his own. Even if he's a direct disciple, he is one of the youngest and is unlikely to inherit Master Katzenberg's mantle. It's no wonder he's eager to forge a lot of ties."

Ves did not understand much about the situation facing direct disciples. They acquired their design philosophies from their Masters. Did that mean they were stuck with it forever or could they pursue a side path in order to differentiate themselves from the main branch of their inherited design philosophy?

Something like that would be useful to know, but Ves forgot to ask for clarification from Tristan.

"Well, I'll probably have more opportunities to talk to him later."

The Barracuda transitioned into FTL and went underway. It would take some time for Ves to reach the territories of the Kinner Tribe.

He particularly looked forward to reaching the Bloodstone System. Everything he heard about Bloodstone stood in sharp contrast to the peaceful and indolent Zin Alpha he just exited.

Bloodstone II became known as the Planet of Red Rocks or more dramatically the Planet Stained in Blood. Such descriptors referenced the frequent amount of conflict that took place on the central planet of the Kinner Tribe.

Though the small third-rate state managed to achieve more stability, that did not mean that Bloodstone II lacked any blood to dye its rocks even redder.

The planet and the rest of the star system acted as a center of business for many mercenary outfits. All of the relevant Kinner institutions related to their

famed mercenary practices operated out of Bloodstone II. The Mercenary Association also set up a regional headquarters there, adding more support to the lively mercenary trade.

Naturally, with so many mech pilots gathered in one place, a portion of which consisted of foreigners, the mech arenas soon followed. Not only did the Kinner Tribe host some of the most exciting mech games in the star sector, they also offered many venues for mech duels.

Mech pilots dueled each other to earn more fame, to resolve vendettas, to improve their evaluation and most importantly to raise their value in event a wealthy client bought their service for life!

"If I didn't know any better, Bloodstone can aptly be described as a slave market for mech pilots. The only difference is that the slaves are willing to indenture themselves." Ves muttered.

The mech pilots who willingly pledged their loyalty to their buyers did so for the future of their children. A small number of citizens of the poor state managed to become wealthy, powerful and influential due to the continuous sacrifices of their parents and grandparents.

Every Kinner dreamed of giving their offspring a better life. They had to make a lot of sacrifices, but it was intimately fair as those who worked hard managed to pass on their gains to the next generation.

In this way, the poor and beleaguered Kinner Tribe managed to carve out a niche that no other state was willing to fulfill and stay upright even when surrounded by different threats.

This kind of hard-working attitude against adversity reminded him a bit of the Bright Republic, except the Kinnners were subject to much more pressure.

His perspective had become colored by the Societal Revival Theory. Ever since Lord Javier brutally laid out how the upper echelons regarded human

society and their beliefs on how they ought to strengthen it, Ves could no longer go back.

The higher he climbed and the more he saw of the universe, the more he began to agree with the assumptions of the theory. It was as if he was slowly turning into a stuck-up member of the upper class he had always despised.

"Maybe I'll reach a point where I'm virtually indistinguishable from the likes of Senator Tovar." He whispered to himself.

Should he fear this development or consider it as a given? The higher his status, the harder it became for him to sympathise with the masses. Becoming a galactic citizen starkly separated him from the majority of humans relegated to living out their entire lives as space peasants.

He recognized that his mentality on society and people shifted drastically from the beginning of his career.

"I was so innocent back then." Ves reminisced. "Times were simpler and I didn't have all these powerful entities intertwining themselves in my life."

He couldn't afford to return to that simple mindset. He might have been happier and more optimistic back then, but he was so naive that his present self wanted to punch his earlier self in the face!

After he spent enough time moping about his mentality shift, he began to dive himself back into work.

Aside from studying up on bestial mechs and smart metal tech, he also went back to the variants he designed for the Skull Architect.

Compared to his own creations, Ves did not really put his full effort into his variants. He mainly focused on improving the technical and usability aspect while substantially holding back on applying his design philosophy.

Ves nonetheless spent a handful of weeks inspecting the variants and making sure they performed soundly. His inability to fabricate prototypes of the mechs in order to test their performance in reality hampered him quite a bit, so he substituted that with as many simulated tests as possible.

The new Sub-Skills he picked up recently helped out a lot in eliminating dozens of tiny flaws he had overlooked.

His lack of passion and energy for the variants became evident in his lazy naming sense.

He named his variant of the Caskar Pike the Molar Pike for reasons he didn't quite know.

His modifications to the spaceborn missileer were mostly basic. He reined in its mobility and introduced various quality-of-life improvements to the software of the mech. His main focus for the Molar Pike was to turn it into a mech that even mech pilots untrained in missile weapon systems could pick it up easily.

For this reason, despite the rather notable drop in maximum performance, Ves expected its effective performance in actual battles to be substantially higher.

"It's not as if most pirate mech pilots can draw out even half of the potential of a Caskar Pike." He muttered.

He applied the same approach to the Toroz Topaz, a variant of the Toroz Ruby. Out of all of the Skull Architect's designs he had come across so far, the spaceborn striker mech design intrigued him the most.

Although it featured a bloated internal architecture due to being armed with both a shotgun and a pair of heat beam projectors, the base model's complicated design neatly showcased the Skull Architect's strengths.

Although his design philosophy focused on energy transmission, in practice he diverted towards maximizing efficiency and performance of almost every part. Which part of a mech did not generate or consume energy?

In effect, the Skull Architect probably faced a choice back when he was a Journeyman. Should he narrow the scope of his design philosophy and work with a narrow definition of energy transmission, or should he widen it to encompass as many aspects as possible?

Clearly, Reno Jimenez chose the latter, and it eventually drove him crazy.

After interacting with many mech designers, Ves came up with a general rule.

"The more ambitious their design philosophies, the more radical their mech designers tend to become."

When Ves applied this rule to himself, he couldn't quite figure out his place in the spectrum. Obviously, his design philosophy was anything but modest, but he himself did not consider himself to be an obsessive maniac such as Gloriana or the Skull Architect.

"I'm not perfect, but I think I can be quite sane and rational when I want to be." He confidently declared.

"Meow."

Lucky, who was floating by his side, clearly disagreed.

"Oh, shut up you. You're just a cat. What do you know about humans? I'm clearly different!"

"Meow!"

Lucky appeared so exasperated by Ves that the cat turned around and phased through the deck. The pet had enough of his owner's self-delusion for one day!

Ves shrugged and resumed his final inspection on his last variant. He took the Jinven, an aerial marksman mech design, and slapped many of the same solutions he developed for his other variants. While he also added in some unique fixes, by and large the Skull Architect's designs all shared the same flaws.

"Perhaps they aren't flaws according to their original designer. Every mech designer has a different idea on which design choices are right."

The resulting variant he lazily called the Airven turned into a mech that any pirate could easily use to become a terror in the skies.

Having finished going over the three variants, Ves transferred the relevant files into an encrypted data chip before placing it in a protective case.

Ves had finally finished his homework. Now, he needed to submit it to his 'teacher'.

"There's probably a way to pass this chip to a Shadow Courier stationed in the Bloodstone System."

### **Chapter 1303 Bloodstone**

The Barracuda transitioned out of FTL at the edge of the infamous Bloodstone System.

As Ves observed the local plot generated by a combination of public data and sensor observations, he noted the high amount of traffic. While the amount of vessels in the Bloodstone System did not match the traffic in port systems such as Bentheim or Zin Alpha, it was somewhat similar in scope to the Reinald Republic's Harkensen System.

Bloodstone reminded Ves of Harkensen in more ways. For example, a lot of ships originated from other states. A lot of them carried powerful people or representatives to this star system in order to contract or buy out a famed Kinner mercenary corps.



Naturally, those who visited Bloodstone in person only consisted of a fraction of business conducted on the planet. Many parties opted to solicit the services of a Kinner mercenary corps through the galactic net, especially if they weren't very picky.

Those who knew better or possessed more exacting demands visited in person, though. This was because every mercenary corps possessed their own characteristics, some of which weren't mentioned in their public record.

As someone who once contracted a mercenary corps before, he knew that there were a lot more variables an employer needed to take into account. Hiring the black-marked Oodis Mudriders to defend the Mech Nursery against Vesian aggression still left a bad taste in his mouth.

Gavin entered his stateroom after the Barracuda began to accelerate towards the inner system.

"Welcome to mercenary central, boss."

"Very funny, Benny."

"So you plan to pick up a mercenary corps here, right? They can get rather expensive."

"Anything of value is expensive. The Kinnners made a name for themselves for offering near-absolute loyalty to their employers. That's better than most mercenaries, who generally aren't known for sticking around when a battle goes sour."

A battle had various outcomes, of which the worse ones inevitably led to death, capture or the loss of a lot of manpower and assets. A single ugly loss could devastate a mercenary corps and force their owners and cadre into ruin or worse.

With these kinds of consequences on the table, which mercenary wouldn't run when faced with strong adversity? Mercenaries running from a battle, even when they were winnable, happened all the time.

Even the Mercenary Association, which attempted to impose some order amidst the chaos, implicitly accepted that such dishonorable would happen. They merely stamped the records of the mercenary corps who failed their mission with red or black marks instead of forcing them to dissolve outright.

Unlike the Mech Trade Association, the Mercenary Association lacked enforcement power. They mainly verified information, kept accurate records and mediated between mercenary corps and their employers.

Although the Mercenary Association's services were very useful and welcome, their lack of deterrent meant that many mercenary corps often got away with misdeeds in the field.

One had to be very careful with hiring mercenaries, even those who hailed from the Kinner Tribe. Visiting Bloodstone in person would help him judge whether he could truly rely on the mercenaries he decided to enlist as his escorts.

"So your current plan is to find a medium-sized mercenary corps and hire them to escort you around the star sector for a year?"

Ves nodded. "Their rates will be rather high compared to hiring a regular mercenary corps for the same period, but I'll happily pay a premium for the reliability I can expect in return."

"And if at the end of the trip you happen to like, the mercenary corps, you plan to extend an offer to buy them out, right?"

"The Avatars of Myth that I've raised is growing far too slowly to my liking."

Ves grimaced. "Even if another year has passed, I don't think that Melkor will be able to finish raising two complete mech companies and a single fully-

trained guard infantry company. Since the Avatars are starting from scratch, it simply takes too much time to vet the new recruits, train them up to standard and instill the right values and principles in their minds."

"All the while, we constantly have to monitor their loyalty." Gavin added. "A single double agent or rogue mech pilot can do a lot of damage if he decides to go berserk while piloting a mech assigned to guard your life."

Someone frequently plagued by paranoia as Ves simply couldn't stand such a possibility. Therefore, he instructed Melkor to watch out for that and prioritize loyalty above everything else.

This was the biggest reason why the Avatar Commander hadn't been able to expand the Avatars of Myth as fast as he liked. No amount of money or training could accelerate the crucial process of vetting and indoctrinating new hires. Not when the Avatars of Myth were still very new and constantly in flux.

For this reason, Ves came up with a possible plan to remedy the circumstances hampering the growth of the Avatars.

By buying out a Kinner mercenary corps and integrating them into the Avatars, his personal troop would suddenly gain a very loyal cadre. The entry of the Kinnners into the ranks would stiffen up the foundation of the Avatars and allow it to grow faster while still remaining in firm control of the bulk of its strength.

Of course, the cost of doing so was very expensive. When translated into a familiar currency, Ves might be looking at a total bill of 30 billion credits!

"The high prices being bandied about at Bloodstone only apply if you want to buy out their mechs, starships and other necessary assets." Gavin noted. "A Kinner mercenary corps is much cheaper to acquire if you only want the people. They can send back their stuff to the Kinner Tribe in order to outfit another band of Kinner mercenaries."

"That's true. This is why many clients that visit Bloodstone also consist of mech designers like me. We've got an abundant amount of mechs and money at our disposal but we're always short on loyal and dependable guards."

"I hear that mech designers are treated very well in Bloodstone for this reason. You'll be treated like a prince, boss."

"I don't think it will be that exaggerated. As a young Journeyman, I don't have the spending power of my older and more established peers. Even so, it's no problem for me to look at medium-sized mercenary corps, especially if I can buy them without their shoddy gear."

Kinner mercenary corps tended to disappoint when it came to the mechs they piloted. The Kinner Tribe still wasn't a prosperous state and its mercenaries couldn't afford to pilot expensive mechs. The best they could do was pilot budget mechs valued at around 20 million bright credits.

The Kinner Tribe instituted all sorts of complicated financial arrangements in order to put a mech in the hands of as many aspiring mercenaries as possible. Otherwise, how could the state keep hiring out mercenaries when they didn't have any mechs to perform their jobs?

If it was possible, Ves would have preferred to replace the mechs of whatever outfit he hired with his own. Yet such an option wasn't realistic. The LMC did not yet possess a robust market presence in the states he intended to visit.

Gavin brought up something else. "By the way, Ves, it's customary for visitors to hire a local guide. Bloodstone is reputed to be a very complex planet. With all the mercenaries and foreigners running around, it can be quite chaotic on the surface."

"Go take care of it, Benny."

As Gavin moved to make the arrangements, Ves returned to staring at all the ship icons displayed on the local plot.

The ships came from all over the star sector. While none of the vessels hailed directly from the second-rate states, citizens of almost every third-rate state converged on Bloodstone II. Ves even noted a couple of lone vessels and small fleets that hailed from the Bright Republic!

"They're a long way away from home!"

Each of these people and influences all traveled to Bloodstone for one reason. The same reason Ves diverted to Bloodstone as well.

Thinking of all the money that must be flowing into the Kinner Tribe's coffers, Ves scoffed. "Even if people aren't able to produce something valuable, they can always turn themselves into products."

The Kinner Tribe's practices leaned a bit too close to slavery for his liking. Ves understood the necessity of it, yet did the Kinner tribesmen truly support these customs, or were they coerced into playing along?

What Ves mostly found disturbing was how the Kinners raised many of their children. Mech pilots were a rarity, so the Kinners resorted to unsavory means to accumulate as many of them as possible. Otherwise, the Kinner Tribe's mercenary pool would have dried up many generations ago.

Too many Kinners grew up knowing that they were hardly worth anything. They grew up in a government camp or institute without ever meeting their biological parents.

Only until they reached ten years old did they have an opportunity to transform their lives. Those who possessed the right genetic aptitude would instantly be taken away and put into a different training regime.

As for those who turned out to be norms, some of them went on to be raised as the support staff for the mech pilots. The remainder just became low-wage laborers who were sent out into other states in order to eke out a living without straining the resources of their home states.

In short, the life of a Kinner from the underclass was barely better than that of a slave. Ves would not want to grow up under those conditions.

After a lengthy period of time, the Barracuda slowly neared orbit of Bloodstone II.

Due to all of the potential dangers involved with letting ships from every state orbit over an inhabited planet, the Kinnners instituted a policy where they could park. The Kinnners forced every visiting vessel to orbit around Bloodstone II-A, a nearby moon.

Bloodstone II-A was a small, barren rock mostly used as a moon-sized warehouse and storage space. Its surrounding orbit was littered with ships and fleets assigned to specific orbits to prevent collisions.

Anyone who deviated from the instructions of traffic control could be expected to be blasted into pieces by all the defensive installations and mech patrols in the vicinity.

A number of space stations orbited the moon as well, providing visitors and commuters with transit to the surface of the Planet Dyed in Blood.

"It certainly looks like someone dumped a planet-sized bucket of red dye over Bloodstone II." Gavin commented as he and Ves looked out of the transparent wall of the space station they entered. Right now, its orientation offered a distant glimpse of the globe colored in red. "It doesn't help that the Kinnners love to incorporate the same shade in all of the architecture."

All of this combined gave visitors the illusion that they were visiting a hellish planet. The ubiquitous bloodstone that made up much of the rocky planet's surface made for relatively poor construction material, but that did not stop most Kinnners from using them as the principal construction material of their structures.

"Meow."

Ves readjusted Lucky's body over his shoulder. "Yeah. Bloodstone probably tastes bad for you."

"Meow."

"Oh? You'll help me pick the right mercenaries to hire? Do you even know what to look for?"

"Meow!"

"Yeah, you did help with selecting the least awful board members for the LMC back then.. not that it helped all that much."

Lucky appeared to be looking forward to having a say in the matter, so Ves did not reject the offer. He knew that Lucky could be quite perceptive, but Ves possessed some tricks as well.

Ves briefly brushed his hand against his head, careful not to mess up his hair.

Almost two months had passed since he departed from Centerpoint. During that time, his spiritual energy reserves came closer and closer to returning to its peak level.

By now, Ves regained sufficient spirituality that it wouldn't do him any harm if he employed some subtle spiritual tricks. At the very least, employing his spiritual vision to see if any of the mercenaries in his consideration possessed the potential to become an expert pilot shouldn't be too demanding!

#### **Chapter 1304 Tribal Corps**

The small party waited for a few minutes before a well-dressed Kinner arrived.

"Mr. Larkinson! It is an honor to be graced with your presence!" The middle-aged woman in a culturally-distinct business outfit spoke and bowed. "My name is Kelandra Vassis, and I will be your guide for the duration of your stay on Bloodstone."

Ves shook her hand and noted that her grip was very strong. Kelandra carried the vibe of a veteran, so she must have seen quite a bit of action in her younger years.

"Pleased to meet you, Kelandra. We'll be placing ourselves in your care."

"Good! Please follow this way to the VIP section. One of our best shuttles is awaiting your arrival. We'll be heading straight down the the spaceport before checking in at your hotel. In my experience, it takes clients at least several days or weeks to find the right mercenary corps to hire or buy out. I highly suggest you take your time as it is costly if you change your mind after everyone involved has signed the contracts."

"I understand. I look forward to exploring some of the other sights on Bloodstone during my stay."

"Excellent choice!" Kelandra praised. "We might not be able to offer the greatest comfort, but excitement is everywhere if you know where to look for it! I'll be able to bring you to the best venues on the planet!"

The Kinner tribeswoman accompanied them to a well-built shuttle. As the vehicle descended to the surface of Bloodstone II, Kelandra began to act like a personal tour guide.

"Bloodstone has much to offer to its visitors. Aside from our vigorous mercenary market, we offer many amenities to mech pilots. Bloodstone is one of the premier destinations for aspiring mech pilots to learn how to become a true mercenary. If for whatever reason you decline to hire a Kinner mercenary corps, there are other outfits for hire that you consider instead."

"So a lot of foreign mech pilots in Bloodstone?"

"Yes, though in all honesty most of them consist of exiles or troubled individuals who aren't welcome in their home states." Kelandra admitted.



"If they're so.. troubled, then who would want to hire them here?"

"Some can be reformed. The training programs we run are harsh, but often succeed in beating the misbehavior out of most of the foreigners who participate in them. The best are picked up to supplement the ranks of our Kinner mercenary corps while the remainder form their own outfits. They're substantially cheaper to hire than a Kinner outfit, so Bloodstone has plenty to offer to customers with tighter budgets."

He did not intend to hire mercenaries with mixed and murky pasts. It was all well and good for mech pilots without a home to seek a second chance at Bloodstone, but Ves had the capital to pick up something better.

However, Kelandra's explanation did offer him a great idea. Since a lot of random mech pilots from all over the star sector converged on Bloodstone, a handful of them might have the potential to become an expert pilot!

While their attitude, training level and combat experience may be problematic, the Avatars could easily remedy most of their shortcomings!

"Is it common to hire individual mech pilots?" Ves asked.

His guide nodded. "It is customary for clients to hire mech pilots by group or outfit. They're already familiar with fighting alongside each other. I do not advise you to pick and choose individual mech pilots. If you try to put together a collection of unfamiliar mech pilots, their lack of trust and coordination will result in very poor performance, whatever individual merits they might suggest."

"Is it possible to supplement a Kinner mercenary corps with individual hires?"

"No. Not unless you buy them out. Then they become your property to do what you wish as long as you abide by the contract. If you merely hire a Kinner outfit, you are not allowed to meddle with how they are run. Their mercenary commanders will warn you if that's the case."

"Sounds reasonable. So if I do hire an individual mech pilot, I'll have to organize them separately?"

Kelandra could see that Ves was being serious. "Our Kinner outfits do not allow the entry of unknown mech pilots unless they earn their approval. As long as the strangers prove themselves, it may be possible for them to integrate with the outfit. At the very least, I don't think the outfits mind too much if you instruct them to transport the mechs that belong to strangers."

A decent amount of individual mech pilots brought their own mechs, though their ownership might be in question. It could be that their mechs belonged to their employers and they simply made off with the machine.

Sometimes, the mechs in question belonged to extinct mercenary corps. The surviving mercenary mech pilots who managed to flee while piloting the mechs did not exactly own the machines.

A mercenary corps was a business, and many of them owed considerable debts. Mercenary pilots technically ought to relinquish their mechs in order to pay back those debts, but many of them simply decide to run off with their 'free' machines.

"The legalities of mercenaries who fall under such circumstances are convoluted and complex." Kelandra stated. "Some decide they don't want to inherit the burden of their mercenary corps and decide to operate outside the confines of the law. That's how many pirates and dark mercenaries are born."

Ves nodded in understanding. "As for those who don't want to become a fugitive?"

"They make.. arrangements. The Mercenary Association will often step in and help the mech pilots negotiate with the creditors. Usually, a mech pilot will be able to maintain possession of their mechs by promising to give up a

proportion of their salary over a couple of decades. The terms vary widely, but they are usually reasonable enough to make it worth it to the mech pilots."

"Very clever." Gavin noted from the side. "A second-hand mech, particularly one that incurred battle damage from a losing battle, has lost a lot of value. Rather than sell them for half of their original value, why not lean on a mech pilot that may be able to earn back the entire worth of the mech over twenty years or so?"

Naturally, a mech pilot always risked crippling injury and death, but as long as they remained prudent, investing in them was not necessarily a bad idea from the perspective of a debt holder.

The most important reason for mech pilots to play along with this arrangement was that they could preserve their reputation and their standing in the Mercenary Association. They would also be able to own a personal mech, which gave them a lot more agency in every future job they accepted.

As Kelandra continued to elaborate on the types of mech pilots that Ves could find on Bloodstone, their shuttle finally landed at a spaceport.

The group exited the vehicle and went through some security and administrative checks before they were allowed to exit the spaceport.

As soon as Ves stepped outside, he smelled the air and took in the impressive sight.

"So this is Bloodstone. It smells like mechs." Ves remarked with a smile.

Almost everything was cast in the same shade of dusky rust red as the bloodstone that marked most of the surface of the planet.

Almost every building in sight featured exteriors that consisted entirely of bloodstone. Even if they incorporated stronger and more resilient materials

underneath, the Kinnners still adhered to tradition and insisted on using the stone.

Aside from all of the bloodstone buildings, a lot of mechs wandered around the streets. Many of them consisted of one of the many mercenary corps of the Kinner Tribe, but plenty of independent or irregular mechs appeared as well.

As Kelandra guided the group to a private aircar, she explained the reason for all the mechs in view.

"Our Kinner Tribe does not impose many restrictions on mechs operating on Bloodstone. Enough of our mercenary corps are present on the planet to deter most troublemakers from starting anything."

"The color schemes and symbols of many of the mechs are the same."

Ves easily spotted hundreds of them from the air. That was far beyond the amount of mechs that a typical mercenary corps could field! All of the mechs looked more expensive on average as well, signifying that they weren't typical Kinner mechs!

"The mechs in question belong to our tribal corps." His guide revealed as their aircar took off in the air. "Our tribal corps used to be one of our most successful mercenary corps. At a certain point, the Kinner Tribe recognized their strength and ability and elevated them to their current status. They effectively serve as our military and law enforcement forces."

That caused Ves to become intrigued. "Does that mean the Kinner Tribe lacks a unified state military?"

"All of our tribal corps are part of our defense forces. It is not that different from how other states operate highly autonomous mech regiments. The only difference is that they don't answer to a pompous officer, but directly to the tribe instead."

When put it that way, the tribal corps did not sound so strange. It would be as if mech regiments such as the Flagrant Vandals or the Apocalypse Heralds weren't part of a greater mech division.

It was a very refreshing approach to organize the mech military of a state, but Ves doubted whether all of the tribal corps in existence got along with each other. Overall, all of their autonomy came at the cost of coordination and cohesion at the strategic level, which was probably the main reason why the Bright Republic and nearly every other state hadn't followed suit.

"It is.. a very novel arrangement." Ves expressed.

Kelandra grinned. "Tribal corps are our greatest pride. Each of them enjoy a storied history where they worked their way upwards by toiling as ordinary mercenaries. It is every Kinner mech pilot's dream to join a tribal corps!"

After a short time, the aircar arrived at one of the upscale hotels of the capital city. Ves and the rest exited their vehicle and stepped into the lobby of the hotel.

From the outside, the hotel looked like some kind of primitive desert ruin. The decor was a lot better on the inside as the architect and interior designers dispensed with the traditional decor.

The interior of the hotel lobby exuded class and sophistication. Although it wasn't the most luxurious accommodation in the city, according to Kelandra it often hosted mech designers and business magnates.

The most principal reason for this was that it was owned and operated by a tribal corps. That subsequently insured that its security was very high.

After Ves and Gavin checked in to the hotel and dumped their luggage in their shared hotel room, they returned to the lobby and followed Kelandra back to the same aircar. There was still a lot of sunshine left from the local star so Ves wanted to begin his tour immediately.

Kelandra informed them of their first destination as the aircar rose in the air.

"Before we start looking for mercenaries, we'll first pay a visit to the Mercenary Association. Some of the mercenary corps for hire will only agree to work for employers who have signed on to the Association themselves."

"Why so?"

"Mostly for greater guarantees. Employers registered at the Mercenary Association will have to abide by a stricter set of rules and regulations. Examples include putting up the full payment along with a generous amount of hazard and conditional pay under escrow, agreeing to abide by arbitration outcomes, and so on."

"Will that actually make a difference?"

"It does. The Mercenary Association may not be able to enforce their rule and regulations themselves, but they've signed treaties with almost every state compelling them to do so in their stead. This effectively means that each contract you've signed with a mercenary corps will have effective legal force. Every Kinner mercenary corps will only consider doing business to employers who register with the Mercenary Association."

It seemed the Mercenary Association wasn't as toothless as he thought. They might not possess a lot of power, but their influence was quite substantial if even the Kinnners trusted in their services!

### **Chapter 1305 Money Talks**

The Mercenary Association maintained a major presence on Bloodstone. How could they not seeing as the Kinner Tribe was one of the major centers of mercenary activity in southern Komodo.

Their regional headquarters consisted of a large and expansive complex. In typical mercenary fashion, the mechs on guard all hailed from several different

mercenary corps, though each of them carried markings revealing them to be Kinners.

Even the guards on foot appeared to be hired hands. Ves found that to be an admirable choice. In this way, the Mercenary Association tried to do its best to show that mercenaries could be trusted to guard sensitive and important locations.

As Kelandra, Ves, Gavin and Lucky stepped out of their aircar, they began to cross the extensive courtyard to an administrative center.

Just like every other structure on the planet, the administrative center purposed for servicing visitors was covered with bloodstone. Even so, the center had been built in the shape of a fortification, so the internal structure plating must be quite resilient.

As they entered the administrative center, they immediately encountered a representative that awaited their arrival.

"Kelandra! Good to see you again? Are you bringing another client?" An exuberant man called.

"Yes. This is Mr. Ves Larkinson, Journeyman Mech Designer from the Bright Republic."

"I've read the files." The man in business attire turned to Ves and stretched his hands. "Welcome to the Mercenary Association! I am Torin Viznef, and I will be handling your registration. Please follow me to my office."

As they all began to move, Ves looked around and saw plenty of visitors entering and exiting the administrative center.

"Your Mercenary Association appears to be doing brisk business."

"Mercenaries are always in demand!" Torin proudly stated. "To most people or organizations of means, it is best for them to cultivate a mech troop

themselves. Yet this is far from easy to manage. It takes time, expertise, investment and more to establish an adequate protection force."

Ves nodded in agreement. He already experienced the difficulties in trying to raise the Avatars of Myth in a personal force that could keep up with his growth.

"Mercenaries aren't the only option out there. Security companies generally have a much higher reputation."

"They are also more expensive." Torin pointed out with a grin. "Aside from that, the main limitation of security companies is that they only accept defensive assignments deployed closer to civilization or a fixed area. Every mech pilot who works for a security company is an employee. They expect to hop into their mechs, go on patrol for a shift, hop out of their mechs and go back home to spend time with their spouses and kids."

That was indeed the major limitation of mech pilots who worked for security companies and many other regular mech forces for that matter. Mech pilots refused to commit to frequent, lengthy deployments. They would have applied for the military if they were willing to endure these challenges.

"And mercenaries are different?" Ves asked, though he partially knew the answer already.

While Torin replied, they finally reached his office and began to sit down on the chairs that floated down from the ceiling.

"Mercenaries are willing to go through lengths that others don't, for a price." Torin grinned. "Even if they wish to start families, at this stage in their lives they are willing to undergo substantial hardship, separation and risk. They're much more independent and daring, and for this reason they won't mind being on deployment for years at a time. For a price, of course."



"Of course." Ves smiled. "Yet while all of that sounds good, in practice their reliability tends to be.. a bit inconsistent."

Torin momentarily dropped his smile. "That is mostly on the fault of the clients. It saddens us that many clients often underestimate or underreport the actual risk degree of the assignments they hand out to mercenary corps. While the Mercenary Association maintains a policy that mercenaries must do their own due diligence when evaluating and accepting contracts, we do not hesitate to sanction a client if they supplied inaccurate information."

Hiring mercenaries could get very expensive, especially over longer periods of time. Ves could easily imagine the more unscrupulous clients misrepresent the actual danger of an assignment in order to save some money. Unfortunately, such malpractices frequently led to the deaths or flight of mercenaries on assignment.

Perhaps this was why the Mercenary Association maintained a system of recording red and black marks on the records of different mercenary corps. It would be unfair to force them to dissolve after being screwed by their clients.

"I suppose that is what my registration is supposed to reinforce, correct?" Ves guessed.

Torin nodded. "Exactly. The Mercenary Association maintains an active treaty with the Bright Republic and many other states. So long as you register with us and sign the relevant documents, you will have essentially agreed to subject to our rules and regulations. If you ever break them, we can lean on the Bright Republic to sanction you on our behalf."

"I understand. Kelandra already informed me of this arrangement."

"Great! Since you know what you're here for, we can immediately move on with the formalities!"

In the next half hour, Ves signed a number of contracts and agreements. He formally registered as a client in the Mercenary Association. With his membership to the Association, he gained access to much more services, but in return he needed to pay a modest amount of membership dues.

Fortunately, to someone as rich as Ves, he could easily bear the fees.

"Great!" Torin said as Ves signed the last virtual document on the data pad after Torin briefly explained all of the clauses. "You have made the right decision. We here at the Mercenary Association believe that mutual satisfaction is always assured as long as both sides are honest and transparent to each other. Registering with us will mean that many mercenary corps, including this planet's famed Kinner outfits, will become available for hire to you. Mind you, as a newly-registered member, you still have a way to go before you can hire the more demanding outfits."

He nodded. Just like collaborating with his peers in collaborative design projects, the mercenary trade also depended heavily on trust and reputation. He would have to conclude numerous successful assignments with smaller mercenary corps before he entered into the consideration of larger and more prestigious mercenary corps.

Torin began to guide Ves and the others back to the entrance of the administrative center.

"I'm thinking of hiring a Kinner mercenary corps for a year before contemplating whether to buy them out. Do you have any words of advice?"

"I figured you would have that intention. They are Bloodstone's specialty product, after all." Torin eyed Ves with an appraising expression. "Hmm, despite your youth, you possess several advantages as a client. Mech designers are known for being loaded with money. Poor and destitute Journeymen practically don't exist! As long as you make your status known

from the start, I'm very certain that many Kinners will seek your patronage. Kelandra can tell you more about that, I'm sure."

"Aye." Kelandra grinned. It wouldn't do to have Torin steal all of her business. "You're going to be a very popular man among the mercenaries, Mr. Larkinson."

"That's because in Bloodstone and the Kinner Tribe, money talks." Torin rubbed his fingers together in a universal 'pay me' gesture. "The Kinners only care about two things, their children's future and money. Any client who can satisfy both will receive their eternal gratitude!"

They eventually reached the exit of the administrative center. Ves said goodbye to Torin and thanked him for his advice.

As the group entered an aircar that would bring them to their next destination, Kelandra elaborated on Torin's previous remark.

"Kinners love to work with mech designers like you. While Novices and Apprentices are rather iffy, Journeymen can always be counted on to pay generously and without much fuss. Not only that, but due to your profession, you can easily supply your mercenaries with newer, better mechs! For this reason, high-ranking mech designers are one of the most desirable clients a mercenary corps could have!"

Ves nodded in understanding. Mech designers possessed an abundance of wealth due to their business endeavors, but could be killed as easily as a regular human. The MTA did not extend much protection to them because they were perfectly capable of insuring their own safety by putting their earnings to use.

"So as long as I make it clear I'm a mech designer, I'll be able to attract more interest?"

"Yes. I suggest you put a badge on your business attire. The MTA should have given you the right to bear the insignia of an officially-recognized Journeyman mech Designer on your person."

Ah, that was one of the many perks he received when the MTA recognized his Journeyman status. It was just buried underneath all of the other minor benefits he received.

Ves called up the interface of his smart clothing, which was currently configured in a stylish and luxurious green business outfit, and added a hexagon-shaped badge with a recognizable symbol onto the breast of his suit.

"Excellent." Kelandra smiled in approval. "As Torin previously mentioned, money talks, and high-ranking Journeymen are practically walking bags of money in our eyes. Ordinarily, many people will try to swindle you, but with a guide like me around, I'll make sure they'll charge you fairly for their services."

Ves smiled back. "I'll be counting on you for that. You too, Benny."

"Don't worry, Ves. I've studied and memorized all the customary rates for mercenaries!" Gavin proudly beat his chest.

Although Ves was inclined to believe in Kelandra's goodwill, she was a Kinner after all. As a local, Ves did not expect her to work too hard in making sure he got a good deal. Having a second person on hand to help him check and negotiate the prices would help keep his supposed guide honest.

This implication did not escape Kelandra's notice. She sent a knowing glance to Ves and Gavin. Even if she knew that her client was on guard against her, she endured this kind of treatment many times. It came with the job and there was no reason for her to be offended about it. She quietly buried her more sketchy plans.

The aircar only made a short trip before descending back to the ground. The Mercenary Association headquarters wasn't situated very far from the oldest, largest and most culturally-significant mercenary halls.

"Welcome to Askaya Halls, the principal gathering place of mercenaries on Bloodstone." Their guide introduced to them as they took in the hustle and bustle of mercenaries and clients entering and exiting the ancient-looking bloodstone halls. "It is here where the first Kinner tribesmen gave their oaths to foreign clients looking for mech pilots to bolster their forces. A new industry was born since then, and Askaya Halls became the premier destination for qualified Kinner mercenary corps to ply their services and servitude to interested clients."

"This is not the only place where we can find mercenaries, right?" Ves asked.

"Correct. Askaya Halls is where our most honorable Kinner mercenary corps showcase what they can offer. While they do not come cheap, their strength and reliability are absolutely not in question!"

Gavin frowned. "Many of those mercenary corps are priced out of our budget, though. We don't intend to buy an entire mech army."

"My demands are more... modest." Ves nodded in support. "I'm currently looking for a more modest-sized mercenary corps that's only a couple of mech companies strong. More would be.. impractical."

Their guide nodded. "I am aware. You will be able to find such mercenary corps as well at Askaya Halls. Even if you decline to hire any of them here, at the very least you'll come away with a benchmark of what our best has to offer."

The group began to enter one of the smaller halls after a leisurely walk through the dusty, unpaved path. The bloodsand that whipped over their

clothes failed to find purchase on Ves' smart clothing, though Gavin was not as well off.

The inside of the hall seemed chaotic to Ves. Despite being the gathering site of the more reputable Kinner mercenary corps, they seemed more like drunken pirates lounging haphazardly at the piece of turf they've claimed.

Kelandra explained the reason for the lack of order. "This was how it looked all those centuries ago when we first hired ourselves out. In order to commemorate that occasion, we have kept everything as it is. The crude surroundings also reminds us of the sacrifices our people have to make in order to survive."

Bloodstone wasn't called the Planet Dyed in Blood for nothing! An endless amount of Kinnners had been sent out into the galaxy from these halls, only for their blood to spill all over the stars!

#### **Chapter 1306 Askaya Halls**

Being a Kinner was a harsh life. Ves understood this. Yet despite their hard living and lack of refinement, Ves admired the Kinnners so much more than the indolent Kamoners!

Living under the shadow of the mighty Friday Coalition, the Kamon Republic may not hold much value. However, their proximity to the second-rate state gave them an unprecedented degree of security as well as extremely lucrative business ties.

For this reason, the Kamon Republic developed in peace for centuries. They neglected their armed forces as well as their mech community in favor of increasing the standard of living of their citizens to the highest level among third-rate states in the Komodo Star Sector.

Perhaps only the citizens of the second-rate states lived better than the Kamoners!

Yet all of their focus on economic and cultural development came at the cost of their ability to stand up and survive on their own. Most of their industry and trade revolved around consumer goods and commodities that made many citizens happier, but did not help a bit in strengthening their military might!

The Kinner Tribe developed in the opposite direction. Situated a distance away from the second-rate states, the small third-rate state did not enjoy the protection of any big brothers.

In fact, its territory was so poor in resources that everyone expected it to be thrown in the dustbin of history in time!

That it managed to hang on and thrive by dint of their mercenary trade drew a lot of admiration from Ves. The Kinnners had no use of frivolous luxuries and pointless consumer goods. They only cared about increasing their strength and providing the next generation with better opportunities.

All of those adherents of the Societal Revival Theory would definitely salivate if they visited the Kinner Tribe. Ves himself was already doing so inwardly ever since he stepped foot on Bloodstone II!

Kelandra guided the group deeper into the hall in order to approach the lounging mercenaries playing Pirate Empires or chatting with their friends on comm. Not a lot of clients had entered the hall this early in the day, so Ves quickly got to talk with a mercenary corps representative.

The Kinner tribesman's eyes lit up as he spotted the approaching visitors and their guide. "Kelandra! Who might you be bringing to us today?"

"This is Mr. Larkinson, a Journeyman who has come all the way from the Republic. He is in search to hire a mercenary corps of your size for a year, with the opportunity to buy it out at the end of the mission."

"So it's one of those situations." The mercenary nodded in understanding. The other representatives in the hall had pitched their ears and heard Kelandra's deliberately raised voice as well. "Well, you've come to the right place!"

The Kinner merc began to introduce the outfit he belonged to. The Roaring Crashers as they called themselves explicitly specialized in offensive operations. The Crashers maintained both a spaceborn and landbound mech contingent, and they were open to attacking both land fortifications and space fortifications.

"Every Crasher is a Kinner of honor and courage!" The representative boasted. "As long as the mission intel is accurate, you can depend on us to crack open any bulwark!"

Ves shook his head. "I apologise, I'm not looking to storm some pirate den or something. I'm mainly in the market for guards and escorts as I tour through the star sector."

"Ah. I see. I'm afraid the Roaring Crashers won't be able to fulfill your request. Guard and escort duty bores us." The merc's face fell.

Kelandra drew Ves and the rest to another gathering of mercs.

"As you see, mercenary corps can specialize in many mission types. The Roaring Crashers for example are very notable for their willingness to take on high-risk offensive operations. While they are very demanding with regards to their prices and conditions, they have enjoyed a lot of success acting as the hammer of their well-heeled clients."

A mercenary corps like the Roaring Crashers could help reinforce a risky offensive operation. Their main draw was their willingness to face danger and their easy availability. For these reasons, hiring them was extremely expensive!



Ves had no desire to pay so much for something he didn't need. Mercenary corps that oriented around more routine missions may not be as ferocious, but they were a lot more affordable.

His guide brought him to another spokesperson.

The stern-looking woman who represented her mercenary corps looked like she had gone through a lot of rough scrapes. She regarded Ves as if she was assessing his threat.

"You've got good judgement, mech designer. Kelandra is a great guide."

"Thank you. Can you tell me about your mercenary corps?"

"Sure! The Emerald Bears came about just over thirty years ago with tribal assistance. We started as a scrappy outfit numbering just half a mech company's worth of spaceborn combatants and a creaky old converted carrier. We mainly started escorting small trade convoys carrying sensitive goods. The pay wasn't all that bad, but we frequently encounter opportunistic pirates and robbers."

"And you beat them without issue?"

"Most of the time. We did well enough that we quickly earned the capital to expand our mechs. That allowed us to take on more elaborate missions. While he mainly focused on developing our spaceborn company, we also raised a landbound company and some guards in order to provide the kind of protection that clients such as you are looking for. Nowadays, we've mostly moved on from escorting trade convoys and entered in the business of protecting VIPs. In our short but storied history, we only failed a handful of times!"

Not every escort or protection mission ended in success. Mercenaries inherently engaged in risky business. Even if they did the best they could, the opposition might still be able to overpower or outwit their defenses.

The Emerald Bears could do little about it except to incur a red mark on their record. However, their failures did little to stop their growth, seeing as they still qualified to hawk their services at Askaya Halls.

"What are your rates?" Ves asked.

The female merc quoted a number of prices in local currency as well as coalition credits and hex credits.

While Ves could somewhat bear the price of hiring them for a year, he felt quite leery about buying them out. Even if he bought them without their equipment, the Emerald Bears still charged a princely sum for their mech pilots!

The woman noticed his hesitation. "All of our mech pilots are veteran Kinner mercenaries with at least ten years under our belt. They've also gone through a lot of supplementary training that increased their systematic performance. You will find none of our mech pilots to be lacking in any way."

Though Ves believed everything she said, the price premium the Emerald Bears charged still fell well outside his psychological limit.

He accepted that acquiring the services of a good mech pilot should cost something. Yet did Ves truly need a mercenary corps as good as the Emerald Bears?

Inwardly, he didn't think so. While he wasn't always conscious about the prices he paid, at these sums Ves did not wish to squander his money!

Eventually, he begged off every offer. "My apologies, but the Emerald Bears seem to be a bit too excessive for what I seek."

"Ah. Is that so? Well, We're always here as long as we are still accepting clients. If you ever change your mind, you'll know where to find us if you are in need of excellent guards!"

As Kelandra took him to a variety of representatives, she managed to gain a better idea of what Ves was looking for. Many of the mercenary corps available for hire were either too large, too small, too expensive or too shabby for his tastes.

"I see now that Askaya Halls likely has little to offer to you." She said after she brought him to multiple smaller halls over the course of several hours. "I hope the visit has still been fruitful for you. These mercenaries are our pride and joy."

"The mercenary corps that I've encountered here are some of the best in the business that I've seen." Ves conceded. "However, it is unnecessary for me to hire the best. It is not as if I wish to enter into a high-risk region like the frontier or the Nyxian Gap. I'll just be touring through some third-rate states. Even if they aren't free of risk, I don't think it's necessary to enlist a mercenary corps that is prepared to wage all-out war."

After Kelandra inquired more about the kind of mercenaries Ves sought to hire, she led them back to an aircar and programmed in a different destination.

"I know exactly where to bring you. Askaya Halls is where all of our best and more reputable mercenary corps ply their business, but the bulk of activity takes place at Ornament Halls. That's where most of the middle-tier mercenary corps have set up. Their price-to-performance ratios are quite high."

"Sounds exactly to my liking."

The site of Ornament Halls was littered with ancient structures. According to Kelandra, the Kinner Tribe used to conduct their most important rituals and ceremonies here. While they had since moved on to more impressive sites,

Ornament Halls remained as the most frequented mercenary gathering place on Bloodstone II.

The amount of traffic at this site surpassed that of Askaya Halls by a considerable degree. Whereas Askaya Halls mainly attracted major clients with big budgets, Ornament Halls seemed more like a bazaar where tons of middling clients haggled face-to-face with the mercenary representatives who set up shop in or outside the halls.

A lot more mercenaries from each outfit were present here, giving clients a greater sense on who they could hire. The mercenaries didn't spend their time sleeping or playing Pirate Empires either. They actually made an effort to look more presentable and ready to answer any questions a potential client might have.

All of this seemed to Ves that these middling mercenary corps needed to exert a lot more effort to get hired.

"The competition between mercenary corps is more intense at this tier." Kelandra explained as she led them through a crowd of Kinner, clients, freelance mech pilots and other people. "While you can still find plenty of Kinner mercenary corps here, a lot of foreign outfits have set up shop as well in these halls."

As they passed by numerous mercenary gatherings, Ves noted that the foreign mercenary corps charged considerably less than their Kinner counterparts. In fact, many of them charged a third or less for the same services a Kinner mercenary corps demanded!

"Are any of these foreigners to your liking?" Kelandra asked.

"No thanks." Ves shook his head. "I came to Bloodstone to hire a Kinner mercenary corps. While these non-Kinner outfits all seem decent, I'm

specifically in need for men and women I can trust. I'm still open to supplementing my escort with individual freelance mech pilots, though."

"I see. Ornament Halls offer plenty of both, have no fear."

The group entered one of the busy halls where Kelandra guided them to a mercenary representative that had just turned away a potential client.

Unlike the reps at Askaya Hall, the mercenary did not recognize Kelandra, though he did identify her role.

"Greetings, mech designer. I speak on behalf of the Vertion Stoneguards, a proud Kinner mercenary corps of over twenty years."

"Tell me about the Stoneguards." Ves asked, intrigued by their name.

"We Stoneguards excel in protecting our clients. We offer comprehensive protection in space, on land and indoors. We have protected many mech designers like you, some of which contracted us to escort them into the riskier parts of space."

"Are the Stoneguards open to being bought out?"

"I'm afraid not." The merc shook his head. "We have ambitions to grow into a tribal corps. We can't do that when we never have the opportunity to return to the Kinner Tribe for the remainder of our lives."

"Ah. I see. I'll be looking elsewhere then. Take care."

As the group moved away, Kelandra made an important remark. "Many Kinner mercenary corps dream of being elevated to a tribal corps, but few manage to do so. The mercenary business is simply too dangerous and attrition can be frightening."

"It's a worthy dream to pursue regardless." Ves replied.

Everyone should set a lofty goal for themselves. Ves had already done so himself, and many great people did likewise.

### Chapter 1307 Shopping for Kinners

Ves talked to many Kinner mercenary reps. Each of them offered something interesting, but not all of them expressed willingness to be bought out.

"It's not that most Kinner mercenary corps are unwilling to sell themselves." Kelandra explained. "In fact, at least half of the reps who denied the possibility would have said yes to a more promising client."

"So I'm not good enough?"

"You are a very fine client, Mr. Larkinson, but older and more renowned people and organizations offer much more certainty. Any Kinner mercenary corps will know what to expect when they plead fealty to clients with records that go back decades."

In other words, Ves was largely a question mark in the eyes of the Kinner tribesmen. Who knew whether he would rise to success or run his career into the ground the next five years?

He didn't blame the Kinners for their reticence. They took their oaths and obligations seriously, so it was exceptionally important they went to bed with a client who would still be around for years to come.

"What about the Kinners with looser standards?" Gavin asked. "I've noticed that not all of the reps seem as picky as you suggest."

"You've heard what they offered. It's not as good as the others." Their guide gestured with her hand. "To be honest, even if every Kinner mercenary corps can be relied upon to fulfill their mission faithfully, not all of them are as skilled, lucky and fortunate as the ones who get to demand higher conditions. The mercenary sector is an inherently risky business. A single setback can wipe out an entire decade's worth of progress. Sometimes, even Kinners have

had enough. They're more than willing to sell themselves to a reasonable client in order to hang up their mercenary coats."

Gavin smirked. "They're also considerably cheaper than the more successful Kinner outfits. I think we can find some good bargains among those who are tired of working for different clients every few months."

Though Gavin had a good point, Ves wasn't sure whether that was a good idea. "The less demanding Kinner outfits tend to suffer from several problems, though. We've met outfits that are stuck with damaged mechs or ships, lost half of their mech pilots, suffer from low morale and so on. I'm all for saving shaving a few bright credits from the final bill, but I don't want to deal with too much dysfunction."

"Let us explore Ornament Halls for the mercenary corps you feel more comfortable with employing, then." Kelandra announced. "I think I know just the outfits that will meet your needs!"

The group spent several hours talking to various mercenary reps. Ves encountered outfits with names such as Stellar Blaze Flyers, Alfarin's Alphas, Bloodstone Bloodstriders, Huntsmen in Black and more.

A few of them seemed suitable to Ves. Although he didn't sign them up right then, Gavin noted down their contact information so they could always get back to the outfits if they made a decision.

Still, as much as Ves found each of these Kinner mercenary corps suitable to escort him, he still found something lacking.

When Kelandra noticed his hesitation and asked him about what he missed, Ves hesitated over his words.

"It's different to describe. I guess I'm just trying to find a spark between us. I don't want to be surrounded with faceless, unfeeling guards all the time."

"I think I know what you mean." The guide said thoughtfully. "You are looking for protectors who can be your companions as well as your guards."

"Right. Rather than serving me because of their oaths or their contractual obligations, I want my protective detail to care about me and my mission."

"Most of these Kinners give the impression that they know nothing about life except fighting and training." Gavin concurred. "They're very dedicated, of that I have no doubt, but they're too different from the mech pilots we're used to back home."

Kelandra ruefully shrugged. "It's all they know. Too many of our children grow up in massive camps. Too many of them are born from cold, heartless artificial wombs instead of actual mother's wombs. We try to give them the life they deserve, but our resources can only be stretched so far."

The somewhat crude Kinners gave Ves the impression of elite mech pilots but without the impeccable skills. They dedicated their life to the mercenary life primarily due to their upbringing, not because of their own choice.

Was there anything wrong with that? Not necessarily. The Kinners may possess a distinctive culture that compelled them to dedicate their lives to service, but at least they possessed a lot more personality than the elites Ves encountered before.

The Kinners were quite capable of finding reasons to live. Even when they were deprived of many of the amenities that Brighters and other people took for granted, they still faced their lives with hope.

If not for themselves, then at least for their children.

Yet even so, Ves still found them to be lacking in some way.



They continued to approach and chat with different Kinner representatives. Ves did not express too much interest in them because they were simply more of the same.

It wasn't until they approached the thirtieth or so representative that Ves looked up a bit. His spiritual senses, which he put on a low blast, suddenly encountered a notable presence.

While he had encountered a handful of mech pilots with spirituality, they mostly turned out to be rather anemic. Even if the Kinnners enjoyed better training, it was doubtful if they would ever be able to develop a force of will.

Not so for the man who sat on his chair with a dour expression. Although his demeanor did not do him a lot of favors in attracting interested clients, to Ves the man practically shone in the dark.

This was a man with an uncommonly high degree of spirituality for a normal mech pilot! In fact, in terms of magnitude, he could even put some expert candidates to shame!

Yet with such abnormal strength, Ves clearly recognized that the man had not developed anything close to a force of will.

"Who is he?" Ves asked his guide.

Kelandra followed his gaze and clicked her tongue when she saw who had caught her client's interest.

"He's.. a bit notorious among us Kinnners. He's not a mere representative, but the commander of his own outfit."

"That's unusual. Mercenary commanders don't show up here in person."

"Because they have better things to do. The only reason why the commander is here is because his mercenary corps is in disgrace."

"Tell me more."

Though Kelandra seemed reluctant, Ves nonetheless insisted.

"His name is Oryn Mair. He used to be a member of one of our famed tribal corps, the Hundred-and-Seventeen Blades. The Blades are some of our best swordsman mech pilots in the tribe. Each of them are renowned swordmasters, both in person and in the cockpit."

The revelation surprised Ves quite a bit. "Why is Commander Mair hanging around at these halls if he possesses such a good background?"

"He screwed up." Kelandra said succinctly. "The Hundred-and-Seventeen Blades only fields 117 mechs and mech pilots in total. That is unusually small for a tribal corps but that is also why they are regarded as one of our premier elites. The Blades have developed an elaborate and complicated procedure to allow for new mech pilots to take the place of the old ones. Oryn Mair was the son of a Blade, and he's been training all his life to take over the seat of his father."

"I take it that went wrong."

"Very much so. His training results are excellent and his dedication is not in question. Yet to become an honored Blade, more is needed. A Blade must be capable of fulfilling the same kind of missions that a regular Kinner mercenary is supposed to complete. Full with confidence, Mair threw himself into these missions. It went wrong right away. He failed to stop a suicide mech from bypassing his machine, allowing it to blow up and take out the client's life."

Ves frowned. That did sound serious. "What was the consequence?"

"The client died, so Mair failed the mission in the worst possible way. After numerous investigations, it turned out that Mair spent too much time in the simulator pods and lacked too much sleep. He had been maintaining this pattern for several days despite being on the job. According to the logs of his

own mechs, his responsiveness dove off a cliff and he momentarily dozed out just as the assassination attempt went through."

According to Kelandra, Mair had been found to be grossly negligent and received a very damaging black mark on his record. While a black mark could be wiped away, the stain would always remain.

For an honorable tribal corps like the Hundred-and-Seventeen Blades, taking in a mech pilot with such a stained record would lead to a massive outcry among its members!

"So the Blades kicked him out?" Ves asked.

"Worse. His own father, the Blade who Oryn sought to replace, disowned his son outright! You have to know that receiving a black mark on your record is one of the greatest shames of our people! We Kinners prize our word highly. If we accept a mission, we will never fail our responsibilities! We might be beaten, we might be outnumbered, we might be outfoxed, but we will never accept a defeat that's caused by our own actions!"

Oryn Mair dozed off on the job. He skipped out on sleep and injected himself with anti-sleep stimulants instead, figuring that the chemicals would be enough to keep him sharp. This severe lapse of judgement ruined his entire reputation and forced his own father to treat Oryn like a stranger!

"What a tragic story!" Gavin said. "Since he disgraced himself so heavily, how come he's still in business?"

"We Kinners might not look favorably towards him, but the Mercenary Association threw him a lifeline. With their support, he managed to put his superior skills to use and slowly completed a string of high-risk missions that other mercenaries would balk at. With the abundant pay he received for his services, he began to hire a band of misfits and problem cases among our

people and put them through excruciating training until they shaped up into decent mech pilots."

"He's doing quite well, it seems."

Kelandra did not appear to be too happy about that. "Not really. His mercenary corps, the Edge of Redemption, are only doing well because they take on tougher missions than most other mercenary corps. The pay is high but the risks are higher. There have been many times when the Edge of Redemption lost a third of their battle strength after a nasty mission. Attrition is horrendous. Many mech pilots who used to serve alongside him are long turned to dust. If you ask me, the Edge of Redemption is riddled with bad luck."

To punctuate her words, Commander Mair did not appear to be having a good day. Most Kinners who passed him openly directed sneers and other rude gestures at him. The clients, witnessing this behavior, all veered away from the pariah of his own people.

Yet to Ves, Commander Mair was like a diamond in the rough. The man's strong spirituality as well as his remarkable story were deeply attractive. How could the Kinners despise such an amazing mech pilot?

Such a man would be perfect in the Avatars of Myth! Not only did he enjoy excellent training, but he possessed an abundant amount of experience in leading and training an eclectic mix of mech pilots.

Best of all, as long as Ves was able to guide Commander's spirituality into developing a force of will, the Avatars might be able to gain their first expert pilot!

As much as Ves wanted to see Melkor or his other relatives become an expert pilot, it would not bring him any benefits. Anytime one of his Avatars broke

through to expert candidate, the Mech Corps would just swoop in and poach the lucky mech pilot, leaving Ves with nothing but empty gratitude.

Yet such a cheap incident would never happen with Commander Mair. As a Kinner who pledged to serve Ves for his entire life, the mech pilot would never break his word, especially after incurring such a shameful black mark early in his career!

The fact that Commander Mair called his outfit the Edge of Redemption already spoke volumes of his determination to do better! With an unbreakable Kinner oath of fealty secure, the Mech Corps would never be able to pry off Commander Mair from Ves' grubby hands if the fellow ever surpassed the extraordinary threshold!

"He's interesting! I want to speak with him!" Ves boldly declared.

Before Kelandra could discourage her client, Ves already strode straight towards the proud mercenary commander.

### **Chapter 1308 Unfair Currency**

Oryn Mair noticed the approach of the group. In fact, with his perceptiveness, he long knew he had been stared at specifically.

To Ves, the man's demeanor reminded him of the war-hardened Larkinsons. That gave him a bit of comfort as well as quite some consternation.

Well-trained, veteran mech pilots had their own pride. They stuck to their principles and did not chase after blind opportunities like their younger and more adventurous counterparts.

Ves automatically adjusted his own demeanor when he recognized the tough customer he was facing. His memories flitted back to his days with the Vandals in the frontier. While he had lost much of his edge after returning from the war, he never truly forgot the depths he had sunk into in order to survive.

"Kelandra. Off to guide another spoiled brat to a bunch of our kids? You've come to the wrong place." Commander Mair grinned at the guide.

"Please indulge my client. He has become oddly interested in your story."

"Am I a circus freak to be laughed and jeered at? I have to admit, you're different from the other brats, kid. You've got some spine in you despite being a mech designer."

"My name is Ves Larkinson. I come from a military lineage in my state."

"Ah, oh really now? Don't think that makes us friends. I care not for the military of other states."

Ves' smile turned a bit harder. "Kelandra spoke right. I can't help but be interested in you and your Edge of Redemption."

The mercenary commander took another look at Ves. Though the two of them recognized an intrinsic quality between them that all veterans of conflict shared, that did not automatically earn the Kinner man's respect.

"What are you looking for?"

"A Kinner mercenary corps that can be depended on. I'm touring half the star sector for a year and I need an experienced and adaptable crew to escort me and keep me safe. After I return to my home state, I'd like to see whether it's possible to buy out the Edge of Redemption if possible."

Mair grunted. "You better look elsewhere, kid. Other Kinner outfits in these halls will be glad to run an easy escort mission. The Edge of Redemption isn't in the business of babysitting little brats like you. We do serious work for serious institutional clients."

"I'll make it worth your while."

"Money is just a possession. The Edge of Redemption is not for sale."

After a stilted back-and-forth, Ves eventually stepped away. The negotiations failed. While he had made multiple offers to hire or buy out the Edge of Redemption, Commander Mair simply refused to entertain any offers.

"Why is the commander even present in Ornament Halls if he ends up rejecting a job? Isn't that counterproductive?" Gavin frowned.

Though he had been met with refusal, Ves did not look displeased. "The most valuable soldiers are always the hardest to recruit."

"Does that mean you'll try again, boss?"

"I don't know." Ves shook his head. "I already had a notion that Commander Mair will be difficult to persuade. When people like him say no, they really mean it. No amount of nagging or haranguing will change the equation."

"I'm not surprised he refused to engage with you." Kelandra said with a calm expression. "Commander Mair is accustomed to performing missions from established institutions and companies. As employers, they are more reliable, dependable and much less likely to undergo any upheaval that changes the mission parameters."

In contrast, working for a supposed 'brat' like Ves came with a lot of disadvantages. His prosperity and his company's prosperity depended highly on himself. If he fell sick or if he made a stupid decision, then he might provoke a very dangerous enemy or suffer a deadly accident!

His relative youth did not make it easier to earn Commander Mair's respect. While Ves had matured a little bit since the start of his career, he looked too much like a rich student who went off to Bloodstone to play with mercenaries.

A client like Ves appealed much more to mercenary bands that lacked the confidence to take tough missions and to survive as an independent outfit.

"Every man has a price." Ves said with a low voice. "I just haven't mentioned the right offer yet."

"You're the Devil Tongue, boss. Why not just talk him into accepting your offer? Back then, I got the feeling that you didn't try your best. I know you've got a lot more verbal tricks in reserve."

Ves reached out and patted Gavin's head. "Do you think it's a good idea to manipulate someone I want to entrust my life to? If I want to obtain Commander Mair's service, I need to appeal with honesty. He'll only resent me if I resort to manipulative practices."

It was the same as if Ves got screwed by a spy like Calabast or Leland. He couldn't afford to make his own bodyguard feel the same way about him. He may suffer from occasional lapses of judgement, but his paranoia did not allow him to make this specific mistake!

His remark happened to meet Kelandra's approval. "Good judgement. We Kinners may not be as sophisticated as the citizens of other states, but we have our own principles. Even a disgraced Kinner like Oryn Mair has his own pride."

"He's a soldier. He deserves at least that much." Ves grunted.

Although Gavin did not necessarily agree, he knew better than to argue the point further.

"Meow."

"I know, Lucky. Commander Mair is the most remarkable mercenary we've met so far. It will be hard to find someone else who matches or exceeds his quality."

Even though Ves privately likened the Kinner Tribe's practices as a disguised form of slavery, the truth was that the Kinners still possessed a lot of choice.



The younger and more inexperienced ones might have very little say, but those who had been in the mercenary business for decades and thrived were considerably more challenging to buy.

They knew their own worth and pursued their own goals. Ves guessed that Commander Mair might still be hoping to redeem his honor in the Kinner Tribe.

"Is Commander Mair's father still alive?" He asked.

"Yes, but he's long past his prime." Kelandra answered. "The elder Mair has relinquished his position as one of the Hundred-and-Seventeen Blades and is involved with training the next generation of Kinner mech pilots. He had hoped that his son would inherit his seat, but in the end another promising Kinner took over as a Blade."

Perhaps that must be what was holding Commander Mair. If Ves read the mercenary right, then the disgraced Kinner must be looking for a way to earn back his father's respect and acknowledgement.

The difficulty of this goal must be immense. To Ves, Commander Mair already undertook a lot of dangerous experiences. His sheer dedication to service should have been worthy of recognition.

Yet was it enough to change the mind of what appeared to be a very stubborn and honor-bound Kinner elite mech pilot?

Though Ves was not a Kinner, he already had a good glimpse of local customs.

The reason why the Kinnners gained so much fame as mercenaries was that they actually took honor and promises seriously. So much so that any Kinner who broke this custom became the eternal shame of their tribe!

Ves idly scratched Lucky's chin. "Part of the reason why the Kinners look down on oathbreakers is because they tarnish their credibility. Their current success is derived from the reliability and trustworthiness they are known for in the mercenary community. Yet a reputation that took centuries to establish can be tarnished in mere moments by a couple of high-profile failures and betrayals."

Reputation was an unfair currency. Good service and good results did not attract that much attention. It took an extremely long span of time and constant excellence to build up a solid reputation. Yet a couple of cheap scandals might easily cause the house of cards to come crashing down!

For this reason, many Kinners appeared to have adopted a very hardline stance towards the sinners of their tribe.

No matter how much Commander Mair toiled as a mercenary, the tribe would never fully forgive him of his previous transgression. Ves suspected that the mercenary commander knew this truth as well, but still held onto his dream of redemption. Perhaps if he worked and suffered hard enough, Commander Mair might be able to earn back his father's recognition.

It depended whether the elder Mair's love for his son surpassed the values and principles instilled by his tribal corps.

Ves even suspected that this psychological restraint may have been holding Oryn Mair back from breaking through to expert candidate.

He sighed. "Let's leave the Edge of Redemption aside for now. While they are interesting to me, they're not the only viable choice available in these halls."

The group continued to wander the halls and the grounds, talking to various mercenary reps. While Ves did not encounter anyone with such a remarkable amount of spirituality, he did encounter several mercenaries with at least some hint of perceivable spirituality.

Sadly, these individuals were far behind compared to Commander Mair. They needed a lot more training and investment before they could knock on the door to the extraordinary threshold.

Ves had to suppress his disappointment as he chatted with the mercenary representatives.

Inwardly, his heart wasn't in it and his attention occasionally drifted off to possible ways he could secure the Edge of Redemption.

The most convenient way would be to assassinate the elder Mair. Although the older man used to be a formidable member of the Hundred-and-Seventeen Blades, Ves doubted the retired mech pilot was near a mech these days.

A mech pilot without a mech was as vulnerable as a regular human.

That left the question how it could be done without tracing the deed back to Ves. It would be difficult for him to sneak off on his own to attempt an assassination with his inept combat skills.

He eyed his pet thoughtfully for a few seconds.

"Meow?"

His cat still wore the Miniaturized Stealth Generator on his neck. Most people thought it was a collar or an accessory, but its power was so much more.

If Ves could find out the elder Mair's location, he could pass on the information to Lucky and instruct his cat to go end the man's life.

With Lucky's uncommon stealth and infiltration abilities, it was child's play for him to slit the throat of an old and retired Kinner mech pilot in his sleep!

Though was that really the right way to go about it? Assassinating a former member of the Hundred-and-Seventeenth Blades would provoke a scandal of massive proportions. Let alone the extreme reaction of the tribal corps in

question, Commander Mair himself might sink into an uncontrollable depression!

If Ves wanted to avoid a greater backlash, then the elder Mair needed to pass on from his life as peacefully as possible. Perhaps Ves could obtain some poisonous substance somewhere and pass it on to Lucky so that his cat could sneakily apply it to the intended victim and induce a quiet and seemingly 'natural' death.

As long as the Kinner authorities uncovered no evidence of foul play, an extreme reaction wouldn't take place. After all, wasn't the former mech pilot already getting it on in years? Dying a bit earlier in their old age was not an unusual outcome to veterans who suffered a lot of battle injuries in their careers.

The only variable remaining was Commander Mair himself. Ves could not predict how the mercenary commander would react to the peaceful death of his father.

Without a way to redeem himself to the person he looked up to the most, what would Commander Mair do next? Would he despair and give up his pursuit, or would he pick himself up and find another reason to live and fight for now that his main goal was forever unattainable?

"What are you thinking about, boss?" Gavin asked with puzzlement. "You haven't been paying attention lately."

Ves drew himself out of his thoughts. "Nothing important."

#### **Chapter 1309 Ethical Boundaries**

The group took a break from their hunt for Kinnners to hire. Kelandra took them to an exclusive restaurant adjacent to Ornament Halls and guided them to a private room to eat lunch.

As Ves chewed some sort of crunchy insect that happened to be a highly-prized delicacy on Bloodstone II, he continued to contemplate the plan he formed in his mind.

Commander Oryn Mair was valuable. Not only was he a mech pilot trained according to the standards of an elite tribal corps, his spirituality also signified great potential.

From what he knew about mech pilots, Ves guessed that as long as Commander Mair adjusted his mentality, there was a strong chance he could break through to expert candidate without requiring too much help!

This would be very convenient to Ves, especially if he succeeded in buying out the mercenary commander and the rest of his outfit! With a near-unbreakable loyalty to Ves, nobody could take the newly-emerged expert candidate from him, not even the Kinner Tribe themselves!

Even if the Kinner Tribe was willing to rehabilitate Commander Mair due to his risen status, they could never openly act in conflict with their own principles!

The Kinnners relied so much on their credibility. Their loyalty was absolute, and their promises could always be relied upon!

Once a Kinner was sold, they remained with their new owners forever, barring some exceptional circumstances!

He did not foresee any problems on this end. The only challenge on his part was that Ves needed to overcome Commander Mair's resistance to being sold before he advanced to expert candidate.

"Even if he doesn't agree to my offer to buy out his mercenary corps, I still have an entire year to do so." Ves softly muttered.

"Meow."

For some reason, Lucky hopped away from Ves and adopted a wary attitude. The cat seemed to detect that his owner was contemplating something awful again!

"Oh, come on, Lucky! I'm just thinking about it! Who can blame me for contemplating a solution? I'm a mech designer! Solving problems is in my nature!"

"Meow meow!"

Ves looked despondent. "Yeah, you're right. Even if I can, it doesn't mean I should."

On one hand, he was really greedy to obtain the services of Commander Mair. Ves had met a lot of mech pilots in his life and developed a pretty good sense of what they were capable of. Commander Mair absolutely held promise, both as a regular mech pilot and a potential expert!

To let such a human treasure slip past his fingers left a very sour taste in his mouth. It was like walking past a shining treasure in the mud. As long as Ves wasn't afraid of getting his hands dirty, he'd be able to obtain a valuable asset!

Yet.. Lucky's disapproving glance made Ves hesitate. Should he really sink to such a depth to secure the loyalty of a promising mech pilot?

"It would be so much easier if Commander Mair was a pirate or some other scum." He softly muttered.

Yet despite his earlier failings, Oryn Mair had gone above and beyond to obtain redemption. Such behavior and drive was worthy of respect and admiration. It reminded Ves of some of the greater Larkinsons in his family, those who took their duty and integrity seriously.

Should Ves give in to his more honorable side and afford Commander Mair the respect he deserved?

Or should he set aside his misgivings and enact his plan, leading to a result that in the end provided a lot of benefits to both Ves and the mercenary commander?

Ves did not necessarily intend any ill towards Commander Mair. To Ves, the Kinner was still suffering from a disgrace that should have been forgiven years ago. The man was fighting an uphill battle for redemption, not knowing that the hill he was climbing was endless.

One of the complicating factors was that Ves truly believed that Commander Mair would be better off under his care. Who in the galaxy possessed a deeper glimpse in the creation of expert pilots than him? Hardly anyone could match his unique advantages!

So why was Ves still hesitating?

He turned to Gavin and asked a sudden question. "Does the end justify the means?"

"Uh, what?"

"If I can achieve a great result by doing something awful, is it worth it to do so?"

"What brought this about?" Gavin frowned.

"Just humor me for a moment."

"Hmmm.. I think humanity is better than that."

"Our civilization's long history says otherwise."

"That's because it was necessary for our survival." Gavin flicked his hand.

"Our race acted like two-faced, backstabbing bastards during the Age of Space and Age of Conquest, but so what? The pompous alien races who terrorized the galaxy were all worse. They deserved everything we unleashed

upon them. In this way, the end indeed justified the means back then. It all depends on who will pay the price."

"In other words, the end only justifies the means if the victim had it coming?"

"Yeah. Nowadays, I think we've outgrown that period in our civilization. Do we really need to revisit our darker sides? Look where that has gotten us. As soon as we stopped targeting the aliens, we turned our darkness against ourselves."

Ves had to admit that his assistant had a good point.

If Ves indeed decided to enact his plan, he might be able to achieve his desired result, but at what cost? Would he be more inclined to make a dirty move towards people who really didn't deserve to be subjected to this kind of treatment?

Perhaps.. he needed to rethink his priorities. At the very least, if Ves was facing some kind of criminal or a bastard, he would have no scruples getting his hands dirty.

Yet that wasn't the case here. Neither Commander Mair or his retired father deserved to be subjected to dishonorable means.

"You were asking me this because of Commander Mair and his Edge of Redemption, right?" Gavin asked.

Ves nodded. "Yeah, but I shelved my plans. As I stated earlier, Commander Mair is a soldier who deserves to be treated with respect. I don't want to resort to my Devil Tongue ways to fool him into working for me. Yet without any special means, I don't have any means to change the stubborn Kinner's mind."

"Earlier you said that everyone has a price. Instead of trying to cheat him into your service, why not try and find a way to give him what he wants?"



Ves grimaced. "I don't think a foreigner like me can interfere in this matter. The entire Kinner Tribe including his own father thinks he's irredeemable. No amount of hard work and excellence in his mercenary career will earn Oryn Mair forgiveness."

He had reached a dead end. While Ves could have offered other rewards to the commander, the man himself stated that money was just a possession. What Commander Mair truly valued was his honor and his father's acknowledgement! Something which Ves could not give unless he was willing to resort to very ugly means!

"To be honest, I still don't understand why you are so hung up over Commander Mair." Gavin said with a hint of confusion lingering in his eyes. "He's definitely something, but is he truly the only choice out here on Bloodstone? There are countless mercenary corps who are more than eager to work for a wealthy mech designer like you. I don't see any reason to tunnel vision on a single mercenary. He doesn't want to work for you, while you don't want to resort to any radical means to change his mind."

Though Ves felt very regretful about passing by a golden opportunity, he accepted Gavin's viewpoint.

"I think you're right. I'll forget about him and turn my attention to other Kinnners. No matter how much I want to obtain someone, not everyone is for sale. I just have to accept that some people will always remain out of reach to me. The Mercenary Association did warn me about encountering this reaction."

The Kinnners valued reputation and credibility highly. Not just among their own tribesmen, but also to the foreign clients looking to enlist their services.

While Ves achieved numerous feats of heroism back home, all of his shiny medals and accolades meant little this far away from the Bright Republic. The

Kinners lacked the context to appreciate his achievements. They only saw him as a young, wealthy Journeyman.

Ves, Gavin and Lucky finished their lunch. To be honest, neither Ves or Gavin found the Kinner delicacies palatable. Only Lucky enjoyed a decent meal among the three as Ves fed him some exotics he bought at a nearby shop.

"Meow.."

Lucky lazily dozed on Ves' shoulder after his sumptuous meal. His tail flitted back and forth with contentment.

Ves sighed and booped his pet in the nose.

"Meow!"

"Maybe I should leave the search to you, Lucky."

Kelandra ignored the antics of her client and led the group to some of the outer halls. Not as many mercenaries and clients frequented these areas as they were usually taken up by less established mercenary corps. More foreign-owned outfits showed up as well, providing potential employers with more affordable alternatives.

It was at one of the outer halls that Lucky suddenly sniffed and raised his head.

"Meow!"

"Hmm? What is it, Lucky?"

"Meow meow!"

There is something remarkable about that pair of mercenaries?"

Lucky pointed him towards a pair of despondent-looking foreigners sitting by themselves in the corner of the hall they were in right now. The two, a man

and a woman, looked fairly young and also shared an obvious family resemblance.

Nothing about their appearance appealed to potential clients. Their grumpy faces and haggard faces suggested they were part of a mercenary corps that was down on their luck.

Yet now that Lucky directed Ves to turn his attention on them, a couple of details stood out.

First, their clothes may have started to look like rags, but they used to be part of a military uniform. Ves could easily imagine the badges and insignia that used to adorn their outfits.

Second, though the two mercs looked despondent, they still possessed some steel in their spine. They must have enjoyed a very proud position in the past.

These weren't the first foreign mercenaries he'd seen on Bloodstone who fled in disgrace. In fact, such stories were actually the norm than the exception.

It was just that the losses the two mercenaries suffered must have been fairly recent. Otherwise, they wouldn't have looked so out of place compared to the other mercenaries who learned they needed to let go of their pasts in order to begin anew.

As Ves came nearer, he discreetly brushed them with his spiritual vision. Both happened to possess a mote of spirituality.

Did that instantly make them special? Not necessarily. Ves already encountered numerous mech pilots like them. Numerous Larkinsons shared the same condition.

Therefore, aside from the peculiarities he observed, Ves did not note anything else that caused Lucky to take interest in the pair.

It didn't hurt to talk, though.

"Looks like the two of you aren't exactly eager to enter the mercenary business." Ves started off on a strong note.

The male looked up with resentful eyes. "We did not choose to be mercenaries. It was forced upon us due to unforeseen circumstances."

"You can say that about half the foreigners in these halls. What makes you so special?"

The mercenary shrugged. "We competed for power and lost. Our noble house is in ruins and our titles are struck from the records. Are you happy now, or do you want to laugh at us some more?"

Ah. Fallen nobles. It always hurt more when you fell from a greater height.

"I do not mean to disparage the two of you." Ves gently raised his hands. "I'm just curious. Are the two of you in charge of a mercenary corps?"

"No." The woman shook her head and spoke up for the first time. "They cut and run on us when we arrived at Bloodstone! They took the mechs owned by our house and started their own outfit without us! We've appealed to the Kinner Tribe and the Mercenary Association but they aren't doing anything to return our stolen property!"

Well, that explained why the pair of foreigners looked so crushed. Ves became increasingly more interested in their story. What was it about them that attracted Lucky's notice?

### **Chapter 1310 House Ingvar**

The two fallen noble scions turned out to be twins. They came from one of the oddest-named states in the local star sector, the Kingdom of the Three Flowers.

The reason for this name dated back to the 'Flowers' who founded the kingdom. The three were natural triplets. Each of the women who went on to become the Flowers all shared the same genes.

Yet from their youngest years, they had been separated from each other and grew up in isolation from each other. Although they knew they had sisters, the lack of interaction with them led to very little sisterly love.

For what reason their parents chose to raise their children in this fashion, Ves had no clue. They deserved to be whacked in the heads for bringing up their children without coming in touch with each other.

In any case, once the three Flowers grew up and reached adulthood, they each possessed a claim to the territory that would eventually become the Kingdom of the Three Flowers.

Therein laid the complication question. Which Flower should inherit the kingdom?

A lot of proposals had been bandied back-and-forth. All of the Flowers were so different from each other that every faction in the kingdom favored a different one.

To cut the long story short, the factions never came to an agreement. The political fights became so ugly that a civil war to determine the succession seemed inevitable!

Yet at the brink of war, the factions oddly managed to calm down long enough to hash out a compromise.

Rather than deciding upon one of the Flowers, why not elevate all three of them to the throne?

It was an extremely flawed compromise that pleased none of the factions, yet what else could they do to stave off the fighting? A civil war would tear apart the kingdom and make it vulnerable to outside invasion! Everyone would lose out in the end if that happened!

Ever since then, the Kingdom of the Three Flowers formally came into being. They imitated the shared rulership structure of the Hexadric Hegemony, but Flowers weren't nearly as good as the matriarchs in sharing power.

A lot of inner conflict still ensued to this day. While the royal houses no longer fought directly against each other, their vassals were often pushed to fight in their stead, either openly or covertly.

The Royal Houses of the Grey Rose, Black Poppy and White Dandelion each struggled to power while simultaneously keeping each other in check. As a result, the balance of power had never experienced a shift since the founding of the houses.

Even so, that did not stop the Flowers from continuing their toxic competition for power.

The two fallen nobles that Ves had met used to be the scions of House Ingvar, which was subordinate to Black Poppy.

While they were not born into the main branch of their house, they turned out to be potentates. This caused House Ingvar to invest in their training in the hopes of assisting the head of the house in the future.

All seemed well to the two nobles. Their privileged upbringing and decent skills allowed them to become fairly notable mech pilots. Once they graduated from the mech academies and returned to their house, they were placed in charge of a household mech company.

"We thought we'd be able to serve with distinction during this period." Imon Ingvar explained to Ves.

The female, Casella Ingvar, continued the story. "But then Black Poppy turned to our house for an important mission. Even now, we still don't know what the Black Poppy wanted from our house. We merely received some vague orders

to mobilize our company and head to a lifeless star system to await our next orders."

They arrived at their destination and waited for their next instructions.

They never came. As the communication channels remained silent, the Ingvar pair finally decided to loosen the restrictions to their quantum entanglement nodes to check up on the latest on the galactic net.

That was when they learned that House Ingvar had fallen!

"How did your house fall all of a sudden?" Ves frowned in puzzlement.

"Shouldn't you have protocols in place to warn the two of you of disaster?"

Imon shook his head. "We were engaging in very covert movements. We took a lot of precautions to hide our presence. Too much, it turns out. A sudden assault struck House Ingvar with such might that none of our relatives and retainers who knew about our deployment could spare any attention to us! We were left in the dark!"

What followed afterwards was a lot of doubt and confusion. This was because the main culprit behind the destruction of House Ingvar turned out to be Black Poppy!

For whatever reason, the royal house turned on its own vassals and employed the full might of its mech divisions to crush every Ingvar they could find!

After the two Ingvars truly realized their house was gone, they led their household mech company out of the Kingdom of Three Flowers and meandered their way over to the Kinner Tribe.

"When we arrived, we were short on money and supplies." Imon despondently noted. "Casella and I left our ship to access the backup accounts that House Ingvar maintained on Bloodstone. That was a mistake!"

"Our household troops betrayed us! The mech pilots appropriated the mechs provided by our house while the spacers crewing our carrier hacked our authorizations and took over complete control! What's worse was that they had the audacity to register themselves as a new mercenary corps called the Horseless Riders!"

The Mercenary Association approved of the establishment of the Horseless Riders. Though Imon and Casella Ingvar strongly objected to this move and cried foul, the fallen nobles made very little progress through arbitration.

"Did the arbitration from the MA achieve anything substantial at all so far?" Ves curiously asked.

"Hahaha!" Imon resentfully laughed. "They refused to force the Horseless Riders to return the stolen assets! All of the mechs along with our carrier still remain in the hands of our treacherous servants to this day! The only concession the MA deigned to give us was to return our personal mechs! Two mechs! That's all!"

Both Imon and Casella gritted their teeth at the thought of this result. They only regained a fraction of what they lost, and the MA seemed unwilling to cede them anything else!

Ves shook his head after hearing this sad tale. "If you ask me, the Mercenary Association protected you and gave you a lifeline."

"What?!" Casella burst out. "That's absurd! The MA totally sided with the thieves! They wanted to shut us up by handing back our mechs in exchange for acknowledging we've lost the right of possession of our remaining mechs and ship!"

Ves chuckled, which seemed to make the Ingvar pair even angrier. "Let me explain how I see it. House Ingvar is no more. Their own superiors, the Royal



House of the Black Poppy, crushed your house themselves. All Ingvar assets should have been formally seized by Black Poppy."

"Except for ours!" Imon protested.

"Says you." Ves raised his hand. "Let me continue. Suppose what I said has happened. Now, your household mech company should have been the property of your house. Neither of you own the assets of your former mech company, correct?"

Both Ingvars reluctantly nodded.

"So properly speaking, the assets of your household mech company actually belongs to Black Poppy. Now, if you continue to annoy the Mercenary Association with your useless demands, who says they won't confiscate your mechs and send them back to their rightful owners at the Kingdom of the Three Flowers?"

"They can't! We will never allow the murderous Black Poppy to take what little we possess!"

"Have you ever heard the saying that possession is nine-tenths of the law?" Ves raised. "Well, from what I've learned, the Mercenary Association often defaults to this rule when it handles arbitration in cases like these. House Ingvar is no more, and while Black Poppy probably claimed all of your fallen house's assets, it's customary that a few bits and pieces fall through the cracks. If we count your household mech company among them, then they were technically ownerless."

"It should have still belonged to us then! We are the remaining surviving heirs of House Ingvars!" Imon exclaimed.

Yet Ves shook his head. "House Ingvar is dissolved. It doesn't exist in any legal sense. Its estate and all of its assets has been absorbed by Black Poppy. What this means is that your last name has become worthless!"

This revelation came as a huge shock to the two! Both Imon and Casella possessed a lot of pride in their house! Even if it had fallen, they still harbored ambitions to take revenge and restore their house!

However, such an endeavor was much harder to do if no one recognized their house and in turn their noble status!

"In the perspective of the Mercenary Association, a deckhand aboard your carrier has as much of a claim to your ship than the two of you. It all comes down to who can manage to claim and secure possession of the ownerless assets first!"

Most likely, the former household mech pilots each claimed their own mechs. Meanwhile, the spacers collectively split the ownership of the carrier, with the captain claiming the largest proportion.

The former soldiers and retainers of House Ingvar probably left no room for Imon and Casella Ingvar in registering their 'salvage' claims.

Likely, the only reason Imon and Casella regained their personal mechs was because the Horseless Riders hadn't recruited mech pilots and assigned them to the mechs fast enough!

The brutal truth had been laid bare to the ignorant two fallen noble scions. Both Imon and Casella appeared devastated!

"Apart from your mechs and some backup funds, the two of you have nothing left, right?"

Imon listlessly nodded.

"Well, far be it for a stranger like me to advise you, but I suggest you pick yourself up. You may have fallen to your lowest point, but at least you are still better off than most. What has been lost can be regained, but you won't come close to doing so if you keep moping around. Move forward. Think about what

you can do in the future, rather than beat yourself up over past decisions that have already been made."

"What's it to you?" Casella narrowed her eyes in suspicion. "Why are you trying to help us? Are you pitying us?"

"I only paid attention to you two because my cat thinks you're interesting." Ves patted Lucky's back.

"Meow!"

Lucky seemed pleased at Ves' recognition. The cat always prided himself for his observation ability!

"I don't see anything worth paying attention to, if I'm being honest. I suggest you rethink your current actions and evaluate whether you are doing something productive. I hope you'll wake up and move forward. At that point, I hope you consider working for me. I'm a great boss and as a mech designer, I can provide you with some great mechs."

Ves had Gavin pass their contact information to the Ingvars before they left.

Kelandra spoke up now that they had walked out of earshot from the fallen nobles. "I don't see why those foreigners are worth your time. Nobles who have lost their houses are some of the worst mercenaries imaginable. They constantly pretend they are still special when they are no different from a mercenary! In fact, even our worst Kinner mercenaries are better than those two crybabies!"

"It is true that the two Ingvars don't make for good mercenary material." Ves conceded, though a grin quickly plastered on his face. "Though it's a different story if I can manage to persuade them to join my Avatars of Myth!"

Only when he came in close proximity and studied the pair up close did he manage to perceive what Lucky had already sensed.

There was something special about the two Ingvars!