

Chapter 1311 Voice of Reason

"We haven't achieved anything so far." Gavin noted to Ves after the end of the day. They had returned to their hotel as the sun faded over the horizon.

"There were plenty of mercenary corps who seemed decent, but you didn't look enthused."

"Kelandra was wrong." Ves remarked. "At the very least, she hasn't told me the complete story."

"How so?"

"Money talks. This is true. Yet sometimes the currency that matters more isn't hard credits, but reputation. If I was a Senior or had a few more years to burnish my name, I would have been able to persuade the likes of Commander Mair to work for me. As it is, I'm far too obscure to recruit the truly valuable mercenaries."

"We always knew that to begin with, boss. In my eyes, you are setting your standards way too high. Don't forget what we are here for. You wanted protection for your trip and loyal mech pilots to bolster the growth of the Avatars of Myth. While it's great if you can get the best, you can still meet these goals with any other Kinner mercenary corps."

The reminder put Ves to thought as he stared at the bloody red sunset over Bloodstone's crimson surface.

"I think you have a point." He admitted as he relaxingly drank a glass of wine.

"I think a bit of Gloriana washed over me. I focused too much on getting the best that I lost sight of the bigger picture."

Lately, Gloriana's insertion into his life made him feel a lot of pressure. He couldn't afford to rest on his laurels. He needed to improve and build up his strength significantly faster than he previously thought.

Yet he got so caught up in trying to squeeze out advantages everywhere that he was starting to lose sight of his boundaries. Growing wealthier, powerful and more capable opened a lot of options that Ves could have never imagined.

With his overactive imagination and his creative mind, he became capable of designing great mechs.

However, his barely-constrained imagination also led him to develop dangerous ideas just because he was capable of putting them into fruition.

Ves noticed that this tendency became increasingly worse over time. When he reflected on his recent actions, he recognized that his common sense and grounded mindset had both been deteriorating for a while.

Was this what all mech designers had to deal with? Or was his artificially-augmented mental attributes to blame?

Maybe Ves was experiencing the same kind of degeneration as all of those infamous admirals and battleship captains back during the Age of Conquest.

The constant pursuit to improve one's raw attributes often led to unintended side effects.

Ves thought that genetic modification had advanced and learned from the mistakes of the past.

Perhaps he was wrong.

The problems might be more intrinsic, making them an unavoidable part of improving oneself. The so-called 'side effects' were so ingrained that they might as well be a core component of the total package.

How many leaders, military officers and dignitaries were running in the galaxy concocting wild schemes and plotting all manner of crimes in order to get an advantage in the current age?

The greater their capabilities, the greater their capacity towards destruction.

The worst part of this realization was that Ves suspected that he was on track to join their ranks.

Did he want to stop or reverse this development?

Not necessarily.

With all the experiences he had been through, he would rather suffer from too much paranoia than be too trusting and naive against a potential threat.

Yet even if he accepted this inevitable transformation, did that mean he had to resign himself to becoming a monster in human skin?

Right now, Ves realized that he always had a solution by his side.

It was the people he kept by his side.

For example, Ves kept Gavin by his side in order to keep him informed and to assist him in passing on instructions and making appointments on his behalf. Yet Ves did not call his assistant Benny for no reason.

Though Gavin harbored suspicions that Ves was suffering from brain damage when he stopped calling his assistant by his real name, the actual reason was much more profound.

At first, it was a conscious way to remind Ves of the danger of letting a gatekeeper gain too much control over his life.

Each time Ves spoke out the name 'Benny', his mind kept harkening back on how Axelar's bodyguard and assistant practically dictated much of the Terran wastrel's life.

After Ves returned from that Master experience, he resolved to never make such a mistake himself. He should always be the one in charge of his own organization instead of the other way around.

However, in his drive to keep up his guard against a trusted subordinate, he overlooked the truth that sometimes a gatekeeper may be right.

Gavin accompanied Ves constantly ever since he returned from the war. Both of them grew up on the same planet, but whereas one became a wildly successful mech designer, the other one still retained much of his common Cloudy Curtain sensibilities.

Each time Ves made an extreme decision, he always did so alone. Yet each time he deliberated on his choices in the company of Gavin, his assistant often acted as a sounding board and a voice of reason.

From the perspective of a mech designer like Ves, it was a matter of specialization. Ves was very much in charge for a reason, but his judgement was only sound in some areas.

In other areas, the judgement of a common space peasant like Gavin was plainly better. The instance of trying to find a way to recruit Commander Mair clearly illustrated this point.

Perhaps the best way to restrain his more unreasonable urges was to have someone at his side who was ready to offer a second opinion.

This was the other function of a gatekeeper. To be a voice of reason whenever their bosses required one.

Ves also had more companions. He had Ketis, Calsie, Melkor, Calabast, his grandfather and so on to help manage his affairs and to provide him with relevant advice.

Just like mechs, no one excelled in every aspect. Multipurpose mechs might claim otherwise, but Ves personally experienced that even they possessed shortcomings.

He was realistic enough to admit that he was nowhere close to a multipurpose mech. He was just good at designing mechs, that was all. In everything else, Ves was far from a knowledgeable expert.

Perhaps Ves should direct his paranoia towards his own judgement once in a while.

"Benny?"

"Yes, boss?"

"Thank you for being with me. Thank you for providing me with sound counsel. Sometimes, I need a good whack to my head whenever I'm contemplating something crazy."

Gavin nervously released a laugh. "You're the boss. That's what you're paying me for, right?"

"Right."

"Seriously though, if there's anything you need that you can't do yourself, just hire someone. Bloodstone may be famed for its mercenaries, but there are more people for hire besides mech pilots. Maybe it's a good idea if you shop around for other experts and specialists while you still have access to one of the best job markets in the star sector."

That did sound like a great idea to Ves. "You're right. Why didn't I think about that? However, hiring someone trustworthy is not going to be easy."

"Then just buy out a Kinner expert, boss. Not every Kinner tribesman is a poorly-educated menial or a mech pilot who doesn't have a life outside fighting, though it may seem that way sometimes. There are plenty of Kinnners who studied other vocations that are looking to sign on to a wealthy benefactor like you. Best of all, they aren't as expensive to buy out as a mercenary corps!"

A bulb went off in Ves' mind. "You're right! It's difficult, if not outright impossible to hire assistants who are both trustworthy and capable! One of the only places where this rule doesn't apply is one Bloodstone! Everyone knows that a Kinner's fealty is ironclad!"

Even so, his lingering paranoia cautioned him to take it easy for now. If he relied too much on this assumption, it might come back to bite him in the butt.

They began to trade ideas on which positions to hire in order to bolster the staff.

"How about hiring a financial manager? You need someone to manage your personal fortune."

"Maybe." Ves hesitated. He really did not want anyone touching his personal funds at all, but he recognized that he may inadvertently squander his money due to his lack of financial acumen. "Put it on the list. If we find a Kinner who can be trusted with my personal assets, I'm open to buying them out."

They traded more suggestions, most of which Ves rejected because they didn't seem necessary. Why should he hire a personal cook when nutrient packs and autochefs already did a decent job in filling his stomach? He was not a picky eater.

A small idea crept up to Ves. "Please add a spymaster to the list."

"A spy? Why would you have need of that kind?" Gavin frowned.

"Perhaps I misspoke. I meant a security expert." Ves rephrased. "Corporate espionage is very real, as we both found out at the Ylvaine Protectorate. I truly need someone who knows how to spy and who can beat them at their own game. Proficiency in counterintelligence is my main priority, but if I ever need someone to snoop on my behalf, I want to have someone capable on hand."

"..Okay. That makes sense, I guess."

"It's not just for me, Benny. The expert we hire can also assist the Avatars of Myth in setting up its virtual security division."

After another ten minutes of trading different possibilities, Gavin suddenly mentioned the most obvious option that they somehow overlooked.

"You need a personal bodyguard."

"Isn't that why I'm here in the first place?"

"Kinner mercenary corps are all geared towards piloting mechs to protect you against other mechs. They might be great against fending off hostile mechs, but that doesn't mean they're adept at foiling assassins in disguise and such. A personal bodyguard who isn't a part of the Avatars of Myth but reports directly to you and only you can be your greatest shoulder to lean on in hard times."

That was true, but a personal bodyguard with great power over Ves might also turn into another Benny. Ves fell silent as he weighed the merits against the risks.

Eventually, he decided that Gavin's suggestion had more pros than cons. While he held great trust in his Avatars of Myth, they weren't exactly around right now. In addition, if they ever became compromised for one reason or another, Ves would not be left completely alone no matter how low he sunk.

"Okay, add that to the top of the list. A personal bodyguard is my number one priority."

Though they both came with plenty more suggestions, Ves begged off on filling up any other functions. Just like with the Avatars of Myth, expanding his staff too fast might result in more harm than good.

"You can always return to Bloodstone in the future to hire additional staff." Gavin remarked. "Even if you don't want to travel all the way to the Kinner

Tribe again, you can order them from the galactic net or send someone like me to take care of this errand."

"True."

The whole reason for Ves to hire a staff was to rely on them to do the jobs that needed to be done much better than himself. They weren't only there to offer to put their expertise to use in advising him, though that was a very important additional benefit to someone like Ves who possessed sketchy judgement in areas outside of mech design.

Ves idly petted Lucky, who was lounging on his lap. "Naturally, my closest companion will always be you, Lucky."

"Meow."

Gavin, who watched the interaction from the side, shook his head.

"Sometimes I wonder whether you truly understand your pet or you are merely making up your own meaning in Lucky's meows."

"Who knows." Ves smirked. "Perhaps I'm talking to myself all the time after all."

"Meow!"

Chapter 1312 Lingering Nostalgia

The next day, Ves and Gavin woke up and prepared for another day of Kinner shopping.

This time, Ves resolved not to go back empty-handed this time.

His extensive talk with Gavin pulled him out of his obsession of collecting the best of the best, regardless whether they were available to him or not.

Continuing to pine over Commander Oryn Mair after the mercenary captain resolutely ruled out working for him should have been the end of the matter.

"It's truly a pity to leave behind a gem in the rough." Ves shook his head in regret. "Still, the price I have to pay in order to obtain an unattainable treasure may be greater than I can stomach."

His actual demands were nowhere near as high. Hiring a decent Kinner mercenary corps ought to satisfy most of his immediate needs with regards to his security.

Rounding that out with a personal bodyguard and an experienced spy adept in virtual security filled up the other gaps. Though Ves could always hire more, his budget wouldn't allow it at the moment. He would just have to stick to the safer parts of space.

After heading down to the hotel lobby, Kelandra greeted them both with an amiable smile. "Good morning, Mr. Larkinson. Shall we resume our search at Ornament Halls, or do you prefer to visit the smaller recruitment venues instead?"

"Let's return to Ornament Halls." Ves decided after a brief moment while holding Lucky. "There are plenty of mercenary corps we haven't encountered yet. I've also readjusted my priorities, so I might want to revisit some of the mercenary representatives that I've spoken to before."

"Alright. We can do that."

As they began to walk towards their aircar, Ves also mentioned his other demands.

"After discussing my lack of qualified help with my assistant, I'd also like to hire some other bodies outside of a combat force."

"Such as?"

Ves listed out his list of priorities.

"I was wondering if you would turn to the rest of our job market." Kelandra nodded in understanding. "Many clients who visit Bloodstone have the same needs as yours. While we are famed for our loyal Kinner mech pilots, not everyone is destined to follow their vocation. Aside from raising logistical personnel to assist our mech pilots, we also excel in raising Kinner who can fulfill other jobs. While low-skilled labor is our most abundant export product, we do offer a fair amount of specialized, high-skilled labor."

"What is their quality?" Gavin asked.

"Do not expect to encounter any exceptional talents. Our systematic education system is geared towards educating a large amount of qualified Kinner experts instead of trying to raise a small number of exceptional talents. Those that do happen to turn out exceptional often join the tribal corps or auction themselves out to our most wealthiest customers."

In other words, Ves should not expect the best. Just like with hiring a mercenary corps, he still lacked the wealth and reputation to buy out the most premier Kinner tribesmen.

The aircar lifted off from the hotel grounds and flew towards Ornament Halls. The short trip ended quickly and the passengers disembarked in order to enter the bustling grounds.

They first resumed touring the halls where the Kinner outfits hung out. Ves talked to numerous representatives, finding out their history, their track record, their fighting strength, their price, their willingness to be bought out and so on. Most reps happily answered his questions.

He kept his spiritual senses peeled for remarkable individuals, but he found no one that came close to matching Commander Mair.

Although Ves could keep looking for better options, he did not wish to prolong his search any longer than necessary.

He decided to take a brief break and discuss his options with Gavin and Kelandra.

"What about the Uliver Dornshields?" Their guide suggested. "While their mech pilots are on the younger side, they are very enthusiastic about signing on to you, Mr. Larkinson."

Gavin shook his head. "They are rather lacking in experience. None of them have ever traveled beyond the region surrounding the Kinner Tribe. I'm not sure they'll be able to handle the situations we encounter as we travel further away from their home state."

"That's a good point." Ves remarked. "While younger Kinnners have the advantage of a longer shelf life, their lack of experience can be a serious detriment. We can't afford to train them on the job. I need mech pilots who are already competent and capable of adjusting to different environments."

A short pause ensued as Gavin perused the notes he took on his data pad. "Remember the Pulsar Thieves? They've been around for several decades, experienced various ups and downs and undertook missions on both the Friday Coalition and the Hexadric Hegemony sides of the star sector."

Ves shook his head. "They are kind of washed-up, though. You can see the tiredness in the eyes of their representative and accompanying mech pilots. They just returned from a mission gone wrong and are on the lookout for an easy retirement."

"Yeah. Their drive is obviously lacking. Their average age is also on the higher side, so their shelf life isn't very long. Despite these factors, they still dare to price themselves as if they are still in their prime."

The group entertained other suggestions. Though Ves did his best to lower his standards, he still found some issue that disqualified a particular Kinner outfit from consideration.

Gavin became increasingly more exasperated at the nitpicking going around. "Fine! What about the Battle Criers!? Sure, they're a bit cruder than the other outfits, but they tick most of your boxes!"

"The Battle Criers?" Ves seriously considered the suggestion. "They're a bit.. unorthodox."

Kelandra knew more about them. "No one expected the Battle Criers to last, to be honest. They rose up from humble beginnings after their founder, Hugin Cinnabar, joined hands with a band of like minded former cadets after graduating from the mech academy. Somehow, despite their shabby mechs and limited numbers, they've grown to a respectable height over the years, mostly due to their penchant for accepting odd missions."

"That has backfired on them several times, though."

"True, but it is admirable how the Battle Criers never came close to dissolution even after suffering a loss. Unlike the Pulsar Thieves, they still managed to retain their fighting will."

The representative of the Battle Criers was a bit.. colorful. Frankly, the Battle Criers reminded him of both Lydia's Swordmaidens and the Flagrant Vandals.

They simultaneously possessed the savageness of the Swordmaidens while pairing it up with the occasional cunning and lack of scruples of the Vandals.

Unfortunately, the Battle Criers did not possess the single-minded devotion to training of the Swordmaidens or the military discipline of the Vandals.

The impression that Ves got out of observing the representative and accompanying mercs was that they were a bunch of courageous but dim-witted ruffians.

Yet how stupid could they really be if they managed to survive for a couple decades?

Ves developed an interest in their mercenary commander. While Hugin Cinnabar was just as old as Oryn Mair, the two were completely different leaders. Whereas Commander Mair enjoyed a privileged military upbringing, Commander Cinnabar rose up from the lowest ranks.

While Commander Cinnabar lacked much of the training and sophistication of Commander Mair, the founder and leader of the Battle Criers still managed to climb to the same height from a much lower starting point.

"Commander Cinnabar must be quite resourceful despite his humble origins." Ves surmised. "It's not easy to start a mercenary corps from scratch and keep it going for two decades."

Though their story was quite remarkable, Kelendra did not entirely approve. "I'm not so sure whether the Battle Criers are the most suitable mercenary corps to protect you. They are much more capable of performing offensive missions. While they are still willing to serve as protective duty, it goes against their instincts. I've heard stories that their men can get unruly if nothing exciting happens."

"I think I can handle that." Ves determined. "If not me, then Commander Cinnabar will surely be able to keep them in line. He's got them this far. If he's willing to accept a protection mission, then he's surely prepared to address this problem."

There were plenty of reasons to hire the Battle Criers.

They were a mixed mercenary corps. They fielded one landbound mech company and one spaceborn mech company. Whether in space or on land, Ves was assured of all-round protection.

They possessed two serviceable light carriers along with one small logistics ship and two transport ships. Such a fleet was sufficient for them to operate in deep space and cut off from civilization for half a year or more.

Their mech pilots were a mix of younger and older Kinners. While they suffered occasional battle losses, they always recruited young blood to invigorate their ranks. In this way, they pooled together youthful enthusiasm with tempered veterancy.

They possessed a good employment history. Only a few failed missions marred their record, and none of them placed the bulk of the blame on their forces.

Best of all, their buyout price was very reasonable, regardless whether Ves opted to obtain their assets.

All in all, as long as Ves didn't mind being around some rough men and women, he'd be able to obtain the dependable and trustworthy Kinner mercenary corps he originally set out to hire.

"Their mechs and ships are still kind of shabby, though. Commander Cinnabar is not a believer in paying for quality." Gavin pointed out one last flaw, as if to deter Ves. "While it's all well and good to replace their old mechs and ships with brand-new ones when you return home, right now we are far away from the Bright Republic. Do you really want to entrust your protection to a bunch of mechs that already look second-hand when bought?"

That happened to be one of the reasons why Ves initially dismissed the Battle Criers. Commander Cinnabar's haphazard command style frequently resulted in losses. This development likely steered him towards purchasing cheaper and more expendable assets.

For this reason, as a fighting force, the Battle Criers depended more on their quantity rather than their quality to win battles. The overall level of training among the Battle Crier mech pilots also left something to be desired.

Compared to Commander Mair and his Edge of Redemption, the disparity in strength was significant!

Yet the more Ves thought about the Battle Criers, the more they started to grow on him. His nostalgia towards the Vandals and the Swordmaidens left him with a lingering attachment towards crude but earnest mech outfits.

"Alright, I've decided!" Ves stood up with gusto while picking up Lucky. "We don't need to hire a crack mercenary troop to fulfill a mere protection duty. The Battle Criers are more than sufficient for the job! Let's go and speak to their rep!"

Though both Kelandra and Gavin still possessed some doubts, this was one choice that Ves was determined to follow through.

After referencing her comm, Kelandra led the group to a hall at the periphery of the grounds that they visited before. Once they squeezed through the crowd of clients and mercenaries, they eventually reached a corner where a rough-faced mercenary representative sat on a chair with his feet propped on a table.

Ves observed the squished carcass of a native Bloodstone bug stuck on the sole of the representative's boots. Its blood and insectile juices had dripped down on the surface of the table long enough to turn dry.

His lips curled up in a rueful smile. He had already resolved to endure some uncouth behavior from his guards.

"Hello again." He began. "We've spoken to you before, remember?"

"Huh?" The representative blearily directed his bloodshot eyes at Ves before taking a huge swig of his cheap beer. "I dun remember you. Fagh! When am I finally done with this boring duty?! PTUH!"

A beer-laden glob of spit landed awfully close to Ves' impeccably clean shoes. He was starting to have second thoughts about this idea.

Chapter 1313 Commander Hugin Cinnabar

Kelandra took over after Ves expressed his disgust. After a half-coherent chat with the drunken mercenary representative, their local guide managed to get the man call for his boss for a potential job.

Twenty minutes passed by. Ves stepped well away from the Battle Crier assigned to represent his mercenary corps, not willing to risk getting soiled by the drunken Kinner's vomit and spit.

Despite the disgraceful display, he did not take it to mind. The other Battle Criers sitting deeper looked a bit more sober and decent. They also possessed a confident and energetic demeanor, which meant that there shouldn't be any problems concerning their motivation.

Eventually, the man they had been waiting for arrived at the hall. A large, heavysset man with ragged red hair came to the drunken representative and whacked the fellow in the cheek!

The force of the blow was so significant that the rep immediately collapsed onto the floor!

"You dumb pig! Is this how you're supposed to attract a client!? Go wash yourself up and report back to base!"

"Y-Y-Yes, commander!"

The big man then turned around and spotted Kelandra. "So who's the foreigner interested in the Battle Criers?"

"I am." Ves confidently stepped forward and offered a hand. "Are you the mercenary commander of the Battle Criers?"

"That I am! Hugin Cinnabar, at your service!"

The commander smacked his palm against the offered hand and attempted to shake it in a crushing grip.

Yet the grip from the soft and delicate hand did not buckle from the Kinner tribesman's strength. Instead, it exerted a strength beyond any human reason!

Commander Cinnabar's eyes widened as he quickly ended his pathetic power play. "You're not an ordinary mech designer!"

"You're not an ordinary Kinner mercenary commander." Ves smiled like a shark. Towards brash types like these, he found it better if he established his dominance first. "I've been through some scrapes in my life."

"Clearly you do." The commander replied with evident respect. "It's really refreshing to meet a mech designer who spent some time outside their stuffy labs. You're interesting! Let's talk!"

The group along with Hugin Cinnabar moved behind the table where the rep used to sit.

"Alright, you layabouts! Clear some space for us!"

Once the lounging mercs left their places, everyone sat down at the seats that had been freed up. Ves did so reluctantly as he spotted some dried stains on the surface of his chair.

Commander Cinnabar noticed his actions and chuckled. "Well, let's get down to business, shall we? Who are you and why are you looking into us?"

"My name is Ves Larkinson, a Journeyman Mech Designer from the Bright Republic. I'm looking into hiring a dependable mercenary corps to escort me and protect me during a year-long tour through the star sector..."

As Ves gave his spiel, the commander keenly kept his ears open. All the basic points came up. Ves not only wanted to hire an all-round mercenary corps that could cover him both in space and on land, but he also wanted the possibility to buy out the Battle Criers if he became satisfied with their service.

This really caught the mercenary commander's attention. "We don't get many offers like this. Most employers don't want to spend any more time with us than necessary. Our special Kinner charm is too much for them to handle, you see."

"I like a man with personality!" Ves chuckled. "I used to spend some time with mech pilots who are somewhat closer to the bottom of the barrel. While hiring better trained and better-armed mech pilots is what most people in my position would do, I don't necessarily think that's a good idea."

"What are you looking for, Mr. Larkinson?"

"I want a mercenary corps who cares. I want the men and women fighting on my behalf to have some spirit. I want the people who I entrust my life upon to be loyal to me not just because their upbringing as a Kinner says so, but because they believe in my cause."

"Interesting." The commander paused. The intrigue in his eyes had never diminished. "I never expected to meet with a client as unique as you. Most mech designers I've worked for are so stuck up that they can't even look at the floor anymore because their necks are too used to looking upwards. We don't exactly offer the qualities they are looking for. They wanted well-behaved, good-looking lap dogs."

Ves grinned. "That's the thing. I'm not looking for lap dogs. I'd rather spend my time with hunting dogs. Do the Battle Criers fit in that category?"

"Hehe. I would liken us more to jackals than thoroughbred dogs. We've got a bit of wildness in us. While we don't make for the best guards, as long as you point us at a target, we'll make sure to tear it into pieces!"

Obviously, a mismatch still existed in what Ves demanded and what the Battle Criers could provide. The mercenary corps mainly undertook offensive missions and only occasionally guarded people or facilities.

They did not make for the best guard mech force. A lot of other Kinner mercenary corps were much more adept in defending a VIP against external threats.

Ves ought to consider hiring them instead. Yet he refused to do so. As he continued to chat with Commander Cinnabar, he became increasingly more comfortable at the thought of hiring the Battle Criers.

Though his nostalgia towards the Vandals and Swordmaidens played a major role in driving him towards this decision, more factors played into his decision.

First, studying Commander Cinnabar's record beforehand and talking to him in person made it clear that Cinnabar was a reliable if flawed commander. Though he did not possess that much tactical and strategic acumen, he was very capable leading and inspiring his men.

Ves thought very highly of this particular ability. It reminded him of Major Verle's manipulative but effective means of raising morale among the Vandals. The tougher the times, the more the ability to motivate and inspire the men became vital to maintaining the cohesion of a force.

It could mean the difference between abandonment and sticking to the end!

Although properly speaking the Battle Criers already ought to be loyal to Ves due to their Kinner values, he would rather gain some more assurances.

As long as he managed to stay on the good side of Commander Cinnabar, then he could trust in the mercenary commander to keep the rest of his men on their side.

This led to the second reason why Ves became enamored by the Battle Criers. He went along well with Commander Cinnabar.

Although the Kinner mercenary leader obviously wanted to play nice to the person with all the money, the two hit it off quite nicely from the start.

Ves liked the honesty and lack of sophistication from Commander Cinnabar. The older man may exaggerate the merits of the Battle Criers by a bit, but he was not ashamed to mention the points they were lacking or needed to work upon.

"We don't own the best mechs." The commander shrugged. "Unless you can supply us with new ones, we won't be able to beat every opponent we come across."

"That's not a problem." Ves dismissively waved his hand. "I'll reserve replacement mechs for the Battle Criers when we return to the Bright Republic. Perhaps by then, I've decided to buy you all out sans your existing assets and integrate you into my Avatars of Myth."

The possibility of being absorbed into another outfit evoked mixed feelings from the commander. "I'm not sure whether I can accept that outcome. I spent so much time building up the Battle Criers that I don't want our hard work and our martial tradition to die out."

"Your men can still form distinctive mech companies within the Avatars." Ves offered a concession. "While I will still demand that you get along with the Avatars and align yourself with their martial tradition, I do not object if your Kinners still maintain a distinct grouping within my personal force. The Battle Criers will still live on, if not on paper, then in spirit."

Using the word spirit evoked a mixed feeling inside Ves. If there was one regret about his decision, it was that Commander Cinnabar did not possess any detectable trace of spirituality. This meant that the man was unlikely to become an expert pilot in his lifetime.

Ves did not take this observation to heart. Even if Commander Cinnabar lacked the potential, perhaps Ves might be able to resolve this issue one day if the Kinner performed exceptionally in his service.

Even if Ves ruled out this option, he could always see if any of the other Battle Criers possessed the potential.

If it turned out that none of them possessed the potential, then Ves would just have to accept this outcome. Picking up mech pilots with the potential to break through the extraordinary threshold was more of a bonus objective than a necessity in his eyes.

At the end of their back-and-forth, both sides gained a good insight on what they wanted from each other.

Ves wanted to try out a Kinner mercenary corps for a year and see if they had what it took to serve him on a more permanent basis.

Commander Cinnabar wanted to draw back from the life of a mercenary who constantly danced on the knife edge for a very simple reason.

"I'm married." The rough-looking man stated. "Ever since I tied the knot, I realized I can't keep going like this and expect to be there for my children. I grew up without knowing my parents, you see. While I love my tribe and my culture, I don't want my sons and daughters to experience what it is like to be raised by nanny bots and overworked matrons."

Ves believed the commander. No normal parent would want to bring up their children in such loveless camps or institutions. Even if this practice was somewhat more acceptable in the Kinner Tribe, that was only because the market always hungered for more Kinnners.

Commander Cinnabar was in his mid-forties and was almost reaching fifty. While he was still in the prime of his mech piloting career, how long would it last? At some point in time, age would begin to catch up to him, no matter what kind of treatments and augmentations he received.

For him to plan for a transition to an easier life of service at this point in his life was a very logical move to make. Though not all of the Battle Criers were as

enthused to leave their freewheeling mercenary days behind, the commander was confident he could get his men to agree to the changes.

Ves smiled. "Family is important. Your children are important. I'll make sure to give you and your Battle Criers the opportunity to spend sufficient time with both. The Avatars of Myth are already set in a way that allows for such. I'm looking to bring you in not because I have a need for hired thugs. I want people who are willing to fight for something greater."

What that 'something greater' actually turned out to be, Ves hoped that it would be him or at least his ideals. Trying to convert the Battle Criers into worshipping his ideals would definitely be a long-term project.

Ves intended to spend a lot of time in indoctrinating the Battle Criers into becoming his most dedicated Avatars!

At the end of their exchange, Commander Cinnabar drew back. "You've given me a lot of food for thought. I'll have to think over your offer and discuss it with my men. This is not a decision to be taken lightly, I think."

"Go ahead. I'll be sticking around on Bloodstone for some time." Ves smiled and waved. "My assistant here will leave behind our contact information. If you have any questions or made up your mind, feel free to call us, commander."

Ves extended his hook. Now he needed to wait and see if the fish would bite.

Chapter 1314 Trinity Halls

So far, Ves extended offers to both the Battle Criers and the Ingvar siblings. Because of the huge implications of accepting the offers, both parties needed some time to consider them carefully.

Not only would they have to accompany Ves as he meandered his way through the star sector for a year, they would also end up on the 'upper' side at the end of the mission.

If they happened to refuse a further extension of employment, then they needed to cut all the way down to the 'lower' side of the star sector. Such a trip not only took a lot of time, but it could also be expensive if they failed to nab an escort mission heading in that direction.

All in all, Ves did not dare predict whether Commander Cinnabar or the Ingvars would accept or not. A good impression at the first meeting might help tilt the decision in his favor, but there were lots of other considerations to take into account.

"The Battle Criers are obviously at the stage where they are open to settling down." Kelandra explained as she guided them to an aircar that would take them out of Ornament Halls. "However, most of them prefer to settle down closer to the Kinner Tribe. This is because it is easier to get in touch with family and friends and to allow for easier access to its various institutions. This is especially important if the bought Kinner want to send their children back to the tribe."

"I take it the younger mercenaries are less eager to settle down than the older ones, right?" Gavin asked.

"That is generally the case. The younger Kinner mech pilots are always full of fire and ready to prove to the star sector that they have what it takes to reach the top of their profession. The ones in their thirties and forties have gone through enough missions to know that their youthful dreams are nothing but unattainable fantasies. They're much more concerned with spending their time with their spouses and raising their children."

The unspoken warning here was that these were just generalities. None of them knew what the sentiment was like at the Battle Criers. Ves already knew that they were a bit abnormal compared to a run-of-the-mill Kinner mercenary corps, but their colorfulness was exactly why they appealed so strongly to his nostalgic sensibilities.

As for the Ingvar twins, while they seemed to be a bit too inexperienced and problematic to work for Ves, they possessed a special quality that even caught Lucky's attention. This reason alone was enough for Ves to try and see if he could exploit the fallen nobles, but it was up to them to decide whether they should serve a different master and leave their vendetta against the Royal House of the Black Poppy unresolved.

Ves quietly shook his head at the thought. Two lone mech pilots with expired noble credentials could never measure up against an entire royal house.

It sounded as absurd as Ves trying to fight against the seemingly-weak but incredibly deep Royal House of Vesia!

They entered an available luxury aircar which swiftly lifted up in the air. The vehicle quietly flew across the capital city to yet another hiring market.

"Both Askaya Halls and Ornament Halls are fine destinations if you want to hire mercenary corps and batches of mech pilots, ship spacers and other support staff." Kelandra noted. "However, if you are looking for other skilled Kinner labor, then we'll have to travel to Trinity Halls."

"What's special about Trinity Halls?" Ves asked as he idly stroked Lucky's back.

"The former two grounds are much more martial oriented, while Trinity Halls is explicitly oriented towards civil purposes. It isn't managed by the Mercenary Association. All the employment contracts are instead handled by smaller and more local institutions."

This didn't matter much when it came to hiring Kinner. Their background and upbringing already guaranteed their loyalty upon being hired or bought out.

The difference mainly mattered when it came to hiring foreign personnel. Due to the distinct mediocrity of Kinner educational institutions, Trinity Halls featured a much higher proportion of foreign-born and educated job seekers.

Just like in the prior two halls, these job seekers ended up on Bloodstone under irregular circumstances. A lot of tragedies happened in the galaxy every day, and the Komodo Star Sector saw its fair share of defeats and disasters which necessitated abrupt flights from home.

Education was expensive. Skilled people still possessed a lot of value. Just because these people fled from their homes didn't mean they no longer served a purpose.

According to Kelandra, while there were always risks associated with hiring the foreigners at Trinity Halls, most of the time they were glad to be taken far away. If not for the considerable expense of leaving for a different star sector, then they would have left for better pastures.

"What kind of guarantee do employers have that they won't cut and run as soon as we bring them back to the Bright Republic?"

"Not a lot, to be honest." Kelandra shook her head. "Oh, they'll be persona non grata at the Kinner Tribe and will have a debt on their name, but in practice it rarely matters."

"Then why hire a foreigner at all if that's the case?"

This was a question that Kelandra often heard from her clients. She smiled.

"Most of the time, the foreigners don't intend to pull off a scam. They're already in big trouble. Burning yet another bridge with one of the few institutions that are willing to give them a second chance is a stupid decision, because we are in touch with all the legal job markets in the star sector. Their only other options after spurning our arrangements is to go underground or go pirate."

The galaxy never ran out of pirates for this reason. There were always people who were stupid and irrational enough to run afoul with the law. Pirates

constantly received an influx of new criminals and fugitives and turned them into the next generation of pirates to terrorize the stars.

One curious question arose within Ves. "Are there mech designers for hire as well?"

"There are." Kelandra replied with a smile. "Although they generally seek other options, some mech designers who are really down on their luck can be found at Trinity Halls. The truly useful ones have already found employment, though, so don't expect to pick up betrodden Journeymen or talented Apprentices who have been backstabbed by their rivals."

That dimmed his enthusiasm. "Oh."

He had little use for the castoffs that other employers found unworthy. Although he could always pick up some young, desperate mech designers and mentor them until they bloomed under his care, Ves had no reason to go through so much effort.

Mentoring Ketis into a promising mech designer had been an intensive effort. While Ves felt very proud at what he accomplished at the end, it also taught him that mutual trust and respect were vital components of a good teacher-student relationship.

Who could tell if a mech designer he picked up at Trinity Halls would turn out to become another Carlos?

Ves still couldn't believe his old friend just up and left the LMC after hearing about his supposed girlfriend. To be honest, his long years of separation from his former classmate and subordinate left him with remarkably little regret at the departure.

The LMC was bigger than just him, Carlos and a couple of other employees. It employed thousands and pumped out hundreds of mechs from the Mech Nursery a month.

Aside from that, Ves also moved on. He went through a lot of experiences and made new friends and acquaintances. To him, Ketis had always been ten times more useful to him than Carlos.

He cut off his musings when their aircar finally landed at the parking zone next to Trinity Halls.

Compared to the hive of activity at Ornament Halls, Trinity Halls was a lot more open and less-trafficked. Ves and the rest did not have to squeeze between crowds or bump into disorderly mercenaries who drank cheap Kinner beer for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

After entering the premises, they immediately entered the largest hall on Kelandra's advice.

"You don't want to visit the other halls. They're filled with rabble."

The main hall was larger and more exquisite than any other hiring venue Ves had visited so far. Well-placed booths and seats interspersed with tasteful plants and chic Kinner artwork gave the place a sophisticated air.

It was also multistoried, offering even more space for Kinner and foreigners to meet their next employers.

"Let's start with finding you a bodyguard." Kelandra said and guided them to an expansive section that had partially been converted into a training space.

A firing range, sparring ring and various exercise equipment offered the prospective hires a way to showcase their abilities and to keep themselves in shape.

A decent number of fit men and women were already making use of the facilities. Fortunately for everyone, an inbuilt suppression system muffled and isolated the noises they made, causing them to be confined in their immediate area.

"You wanted to find a Kinner bodyguard, right?"

"Correct. Preferably, a high-class one, but I'm open to other options. I'll have to see for myself and see if we can click."

"If that is what you want. I'll take you to the highest graded bodyguards first."

The Kinnners operated elite schools and training academies for a variety of demanding professions, including one for bodyguards. It was actually one of their most profitable ventures as the yields they earned were very extravagant.

It probably cost the equivalent of a few million bright credits to train a competent bodyguard that possessed proficiencies in all the major skills.

This was not that remarkable in isolation. It was only when their well-trained skills combined with the characteristic Kinner loyalty that their effective value ballooned.

Paying the equivalent of ten million, a hundred million or even a billion bright credits for successively better bodyguards was not unusual at Trinity Halls!

To many clients, the value of an excellent and extremely loyal Kinner bodyguard absolutely surpassed that of a fantastic mech.

That was because bodyguards could accompany their clients everywhere, even indoors, while mechs were mostly stuck outside!

Ves himself spent a lot of time indoors, either inside his lab, his ship or his office. He also spent significant amounts of time at someone else's premises.

While Ves and Lucky could take care of some threats himself, they weren't specialized in defending themselves. Hiring a professional who dedicated their entire life to protecting their clients made a lot of sense, especially since Ves continued to become more prominent and therefore attract more danger.

In the next hour, Ves toured the section while Kelandra introduced him to various well-trained Kinner bodyguards. Each of them equaled an elite guard or commando in the sheer amount of skills they possessed as well as the depth in which they polished them over the years.

The more expensive ones also made use of genetic and biological modification to increase their physical attributes. They were noticeably stronger, tougher and more enduring than a run-of-the-mill bodyguard.

Different gene mod templates applied different sets of alien genes in their genetic code, causing them to acquire different inhuman traits. Some were visible, such as turning someone's skin into tough, heat-resistant scales, but most of the changes happened internally.

"Our Kinner medical experts aren't good at developing new gene mod templates." Kelandra said. "We also aren't in the habit of buying the latest versions of templates when they come out. We prefer to stick to tried-and-tested gene mod templates that are renowned for their stability and consistency. We try to avoid unpleasant-looking mutations and try to keep the side effects to a minimum."

As a result, most gene mod templates applied to the bodyguards were decades or even centuries old.

While this meant that their positive effects couldn't match up against newer templates, the Kinnners didn't have to be afraid of extreme shifts in mentality or premature breakdowns!

Such a stance neatly showcased the practical attitude of the Kinnners. They didn't fancy after the best or latest solutions. They were already content with the affordable ones that worked.

Ves could learn a thing or two from their culture.

Chapter 1315 Secretive Order

Ves did not find a bodyguard he wanted to buy out on the spot at Trinity Halls.

Certainly, he met many competent and athletic Kinnners who knew how to triage, how to survive in a wilderness and how to operate dozens of different weapons.

Some of the more expensive ones even incorporated alien organs in their body that gave them capabilities that might prove invaluable.

The ability to sniff out toxins, see infrared, fire out bone shards from an organic arm cannon and more offered additional flexibility when their equipment failed.

With the prevalence of hacking, relying too much on technology was a common vulnerability that many unscrupulous actors exploited!

Yet despite all these fancy offerings, the bodyguards themselves seemed to be a bit devoid of.. personality.

Similar to elite mech pilots, these top Kinner bodyguards underwent the most intensive training programs to become so good. This left very little time for self-expression and other activities.

"They're too much like bots." Ves shook his head. "I don't doubt their competence, but I never liked to surround myself with people who don't think for themselves."

Kelandra looked surprised at that. "Oh? That is not what other clients think. They prefer to hire consummate professionals. They're easier to control and they don't have to divert extra attention to keep them happy."

"I'm looking to hire a person. I'm not looking to acquire furniture."

He said this for a very specific reason. Even though spirituality did not appear to play a significant role to people other than mech pilots and mech designers, Ves knew better than to take this assumption for granted.

Throughout his career, he encountered a fair amount of abnormal incidents related to spirituality. The frontier especially showed him that different applications of spirituality did indeed exist.

Although the possibility was faint, Ves wanted to try his luck and see if he could uncover a Kinner with spiritual potential among the bodyguards for hire.

Two of the most iconic examples of humans wielding spiritual power in a personal capacity stood out to him. The memories still haunted him whenever his paranoia flared up at times.

One was an assassination attempt that happened early in his career. Some sniper armed with a railgun of all weapons seemingly marked him with a touch of spiritual energy that harkened to a cold wind snuffing out a flickering candle.

The other was the weird stealth tricks employed by the cultists of the Church of Haatumak.

Ves did not have any hopes of uncovering a Kinner who could do something as crazy as the latter. The worshippers of Haatumak were only able to develop these extreme abilities due to their hidden connection to the Five Scrolls Compact.

In truth, even if he found a bodyguard with dormant spiritual potential, Ves had no clue how to develop it into an actual power.

For this reason, Ves did not perform his search for a bodyguard with high expectations in mind.

After passing over the elites, Ves began to trawl through the lower tiers of bodyguards. While they lacked the proficiency and augments of the former group, they were livelier and more motivated to attract his attention.

Ves found that kind of odd, but Kelandra quickly explained the reason.

"When these bodyguards sign themselves over, they have accepted the possibility that they might have to sacrifice their lives to perform their duties. They do so willingly because they invest all of their pay into their children."

"I see."

"Perhaps it is a little odd to a foreigner like you, but some of the elite bodyguards you've encountered before are products of such sacrifice."

The Kinners were very much oriented towards martial service. They elevated fighting professions above civil professions. For this reason, wanting a child to become a much better bodyguard than themselves did not sound odd to the tribesmen.

Ves privately considered them weirdos, but he knew better than to voice his opinion.

As the hours went by, Ves patiently sounded out a lot of prospective bodyguards. Most of them share similar backgrounds, so none of them diverged too much from each other.

Despite that, Ves still took a liking for a couple of them. Gavin noted his selection and already started to research their background details.

As Ves encountered more and more bodyguards who didn't appear to possess any special qualities, Ves finally diverted his eyes towards a large and athletic woman who entered the sparring ring.

The woman challenged a shorter but equally tough-looking woman for a light spar. Both of them began to circle around each other while darting close to

exchange some quick punches and kicks. A remote cushioning system built into the sparring ring made sure that none of the strikes delivered any severe damage.

While Ves hadn't noticed the tall woman with medium, braided blond hair before, the spar she engaged in had tickled his spiritual senses.

The others also stopped to see what caught his attention.

The blond woman made for a remarkable sight. Not only was she taller than Ves, she also possessed an excellent, balanced musculature that reminded him of professional athletes.

Her training outfit did not show off too much skin. What the female bodyguard did reveal was plenty of tattoos, each of them harmonizing with each other in some profound, tribal meaning.

Though her appearance did not conform to the prevalent beauty standards, she attracted plenty of stares even from other Kinners due to her Amazonian physique!

"Don't you already have Gloriana, boss?" Gavin frowned. "How would your 'girlfriend' react when she finds out you've been ogling at another woman? Or are athletically-strong women your type?"

"It's not like that, Benny." Ves hissed. "There's something special about her. She's different from all the other bodyguards I've approached so far."

"I don't see how. Her appearance might be more exotic, but the other bodyguards look much stronger when they spar."

Ves couldn't adequately explain what he found so remarkable about the female bodyguard. Not without bringing up his secrets.

Instead, he turned to Lucky, who was perched on his shoulder. "What do you think, buddy?"

"Meow!"

"You agree, right?"

"Meow!"

"Thought so!"

Gavin looked askance. "Uhm, boss, is it really wise to trust the judgement of your cat? Did he come with a human resource management software package or something?"

"No. Lucky is just astute when it comes to sniffing out remarkable people."

"Well, you're right about that, sir." Kelandra spoke up. "She's a famous one at Trinity Hall."

"Who is she?"

"She's called Fe Nitaa, and she's not a regular Kinner. She used to be a trainee of the Order of Fl'xix."

The way she pronounced Fl'xix sounded so odd that Ves had the impression of hearing an alien!

"What is this Order of Flix all about?"

"It's pronounced Fl'xix. Don't let anyone of the order hear you butcher that word." Their local guide warned. "The order is a secretive organization in the Kinner Tribe. I myself don't know what they do, exactly, but most of us guess that protecting our most revered tribesmen is among one of their duties."

"Since this order is so secretive, why is Miss Nitaa at Trinity Halls looking for another job?"

"She failed to meet the order's standards. The Order of Fl'xix is an elite institution. Every Fl'xixian that has appeared in public has always left an

unforgettable impression. Miss Nitaa.. falls short. She has no place in the order."

That sounded fairly brutal to the woman in question. It was very difficult for someone to pick themselves up after investing all their time and effort into meeting the order's unattainable standards.

Still, Fe Nitaa maintained a stoic face. If Ves did not hear her story from Kelandra, then he would have thought that Fe Nitaa was just an odd bodyguard.

Now, he found out that the odd bodyguard possessed a complicated past as well.

"What do you think about Miss Nitaa? It seems like you're familiar with her already."

"For a bodyguard, she's good enough, I suppose." Kelandra replied. "She's not as good as the elites who have been trained for the job from birth, but many of her existing skills cross over with what is expected from a personal bodyguard."

"You'd expect someone like her to get hired already." Gavin noted from the side. "Since you know her by name, that means she's been hanging out in this hall for a while. Why hasn't she been snapped up yet?"

Now that Ves thought about it, that did sound odd.

Kelandra shook her head. "She refused their offers. A lot of clients, particularly men, offered her cushy positions, yet she refused their offers outright. It didn't matter if they wanted to hire her for a fixed period or buy her out for an indefinite time, she all said no to them. For what reason, none of us know."

That sounded like another tough customer to Ves. He already grimaced as he feared another instance like Commander Mair. It was so excruciating for him to find a promising treasure, only to leave it behind.

Nonetheless, nothing ventured, nothing tried. He had to see for himself if Fe Nitaa proved to be an equally unattainable hire.

Ves sent a look to Kelandra, who got the message.

She stepped forward and approached the edge of the ring. She sent a hand signal to the sparring combatants that prompted them to separate from each other. A slightly winded Fe Nitaa stretched her limbs a bit before approaching the guide.

The two leaned close and whispered to each other. After this brief exchange, Nitaa took a deep look at Ves with her yellow eyes.

The exchange lasted for a minute before they separated again. When Kelandra came back, Ves expected a rejection. Why else would Nitaa turn away?

"She accepted your offer of buying her out."

"Wait, what!?" Gavin spluttered. "We haven't even extended her an offer yet!"

Even Ves was taken aback. He took another look at Nitaa, but all he saw was her back as she entered a side corridor in order to shower and freshen herself up.

"According to Nitaa, Mr. Larkinson qualifies." Kelandra said with an odd face. Even she was confused! "She accepts any contract you give her. It matters little to her if you want to employ her for a year or for the rest of her life. Even if you pay her enough money to buy a single nutrient pack, she will still take an oath to serve you as a personal bodyguard for the rest of her life!"

"What?!"

Gavin simply couldn't get his mind around this absurd circumstance.

Even Ves didn't know what had happened. He was too suspicious to believe that Fe Nitaa just took a liking to him after rejecting so many other offers to employ her services.

There was something fishy about Fe Nitaa's premature acceptance!

Even Gavin could tell that something abnormal went on. He turned to Ves. "Maybe you should reconsider, boss. Normal Kinners don't offer themselves to a random client for free. At least even slaves think they are worth something!"

Ves turned back to Kelandra. "Do you know why Miss Nitaa offered those conditions? Is it an imposition from her former order, maybe?"

"No." Kelandra shook her head. "The Order of Fl'ix has produced plenty of dropouts. Many Kinners aspire to join their ranks. Few actually manage to pass their tests. She.. has not been forthcoming with her reasons to me. Perhaps you should ask her yourself."

That was a good idea. So far, Fe Nitaa only expressed verbal approval at any employment arrangements that Ves might wish to make. They hadn't signed any contracts yet. As long as neither of them recorded their agreement in a legally-recognized document, Ves could still walk away if he didn't like what Fe Nitaa had to say.

The special quirk in spirituality that he and Lucky sensed during her spar might be interesting to him, but it wasn't worth a blind leap into the unknown.

Chapter 1316 Bloody Nose

It took some time for Fe Nitaa to reemerge. She changed out her workout clothes for a stiff, formal-looking suit common to bodyguards. Ves knew that her suit was probably padded with a thin layer of armor in order to help her withstand infantry weapon fire.

Her suit might also hide all manner of weapons, from knives to collapsable rifles.

Even if Ves wore his shield generator, he still felt threatened by her proximity. So long as she hadn't pledged to serve him, she would not prioritize his life over hers.

At least that was how it should have been.

"Mr. Larkinson." She spoke with an impassive voice as she bowed in front of him. "My name is Fe Nitaa. I pledge to serve you for all my life until you deem fit to dismiss me. By the ancient customs of the Kinner Tribe, I agree to serve you in a manner befitting my tribe. In return, I hope you treat me with the dignity and respect of a Kinner."

"Uhh..."

"The pledge is not valid until it is formally registered at the Kinner Tribe." Kelandra stepped in. "Nitaa, we should first draw up a contract and negotiate on its terms."

"I will accept any terms Mr. Larkinson deems fit to set as long as it abides by Kinner standards."

"Nitaa! Are you out of your mind! As a fellow Kinner, I highly advise you to make a careful decision! You are throwing away your negotiating position! At least consult a contract lawyer. There are plenty of them hanging around here at Trinity Halls."

"No need." Nitaa shook her head. "I have pledged to serve Mr. Larkinson. Contract or no, my word is sufficient!"

"That's not how it works!"

"Ladies!" Ves forcefully interrupted. "Kelandra, I understand your concerns. I do not wish to take advantage of Nitaa. How about you go and call for one of

those contract lawyers and prepare a proper document? Meanwhile, I'd like to talk to Nitaa in private. Is that alright?"

Though she still had a lot of misgivings, Kelandra reluctantly nodded. At the very least, getting Nitaa outside counsel was a lot better than leaving her to 'negotiate' by herself!

Once the guide left their side, Ves turned to the tall and imposing woman and directed a sharp smile at her. "Now that the distraction is gone, can you finally tell me why you want to work for me? I believe there must be a very special reason why you offered such uncommon conditions."

Nitaa directed her eyes towards Lucky and Gavin before sweeping the rest of the hall. "Not here. I have my reasons, but they are not meant for other ears. There are private conference rooms not far away from here."

They quietly followed her outside of the hall and into a set of corridors that led to various meeting and conference rooms. As Nitaa walked up to an unoccupied room, she turned to Gavin.

"Not you."

"Pardon?"

"It is best for Mr. Larkinson to hear what I have to say alone."

"Oh, come on! I'm his executive assistant!"

"But does he trust you?" Nitaa asked.

For some reason, that question cut very deep.

Before Gavin considered the question seriously, Ves held up his arm. "I'll humor her for now, Benny. For now, stay outside. I'll see what she has to say."

"Your cat is a security vulnerability." She spoke.

"Not really." Ves shook his head. "Let's get inside."

He did not brook any further suggestions and went on to enter the room. This forced Nitaa to accept his decision and follow suit, though she did so with a frown.

Once they closed and locked the room, Ves patted Lucky's head. "Activate your ECM. Put it in a higher strength this time."

A moderate interference field encompassed the entire conference room. It was so strong in fact that it even spilled over into the corridor!

The display was enough to take Fe Nitaa by surprise for the first time. "I did not expect your mechanical pet to be capable of projecting an interference field of this strength. This is high technology."

"That is very knowledgeable of you. Do all bodyguards possess the knowledge to make this kind of observation?" Ves pointedly asked.

His suspicion towards Fe Nitaa deepened.

"What I am about to reveal to you is utmost sensitive, Mr. Larkinson. For your own good, you do not want us to be observed. Are you absolutely confident that your ECM can block every form of observation?"

"I'm pretty confident. It's derived from CFA tech."

"As expected!" A small smile appeared on the tall woman's face.

"As.. expected..?" Ves raised his eyebrow. What was that supposed to mean?

Seeing that Ves possessed a very strong means of blocking outside observation, the woman no longer hesitated.

In a display that absolutely dazzled him, Nitaa began to bow and prostrate before his feet!

"All hail the Holy Son of the immortal gods! All hail the Holder of one of the Sacred Scrolls!"

WHAAAAAAAAT?!

Ves practically jumped out of his skin. His shock and fear was so immense that Lucky immediately yowled in alarm and took on a fighting posture in the air.

"Meow?!"

Meanwhile, Ves took a few steps back to get some distance from the physically strong fighter and drew out the Peaceful Repose from his belt holster. He immediately aimed the muzzle of his custom ballistic pistol at the woman who knew one of his secrets!

"What is the meaning of this! Who are you?! Why do you think I'm this 'Holy Son'?!"

After years since his return from the frontier, Ves quietly buried the incidents related to the Metal Scroll and the Five Scrolls Compact to the back of his mind.

While the secretive trans-galactic cult that rivaled the MTA and CFA in scope had its tentacles everywhere, their strength was very dispersed. Ves always suspected that the Compact only inserted a handful of informers and offshoot organizations in the Komodo Star Sector.

The chance of encountering one of their ilk was very low. For them to be able to figure out that he was a mythical Holy Son should have been an even more unlikely occurrence.

Yet all of his calculations couldn't account for coincidence and bad luck!

Nitaa continued to kneel in supplication, taking no notice at Ves' barking tone or the fact that he pointed a deadly weapon at her head.

"You need not be concerned, Your Holiness. I am not a member of the Order of Fl'xix. If I was, my responsibilities would be very different. At this moment, I represent myself in kneeling before your august presence."

The hell?! Ves wanted to scream in frustration. Out of everyone in the galaxy, he just had to meet another person who knew one of his secret identities. Worse yet, Fe Nitaa managed to sniff it out from a distance! Wasn't his true status supposed to be undetectable aside from a special blood test?!

"How did you know?! Tell me!" Ves barked. He didn't bother to deny Nitaa's assertion that he was a Holy Son. The situation had already moved beyond that point. "Does the rest of the Order of.. can other Kinners do what you have managed to do?!"

"You.. you are not of the Compact?" Nitaa frowned even as she faced the ground.

"No! I've been trying to avoid their detection for years!"

"I see." Fe Nitaa sighed. "You have no need to fear me, Your Holiness. While the Order of Fl'xix is indeed connected to the Compact, I am different. I am certain that they do not have the capacity to detect your brilliance."

"How so? What makes you different from the others? How sure are you that no one else can do what you can?"

"Because.. I am no longer a formal member of the order." Nitaa admitted.

"They used me. The order, the Compact... I devoted my life to them, yet they treated me as a failure and an experiment. If not for my oaths, I would not have left the order peacefully."

"What was this experiment supposed to accomplish?" Ves narrowed his eyes.

"I can sense a Sacred Scroll on you with my special nose. I have never smelled this immaterial scent before, but as soon as my special nose picked it up, I received an unspoken message in my head!"

That immediately set off additional waves of panic inside Ves. If Fe Nitaa could already do such, how many other people were out there in the galaxy sniffing around for any trace of the Metal Scroll?!

The woman took no notice of his distress. "There are some in the Compact who believe that the Metal Scroll has never been destroyed. Such an incredible artifact should never be vulnerable to material means of destruction! Even if you throw a Sacred Scroll into a black hole, it should still be able to escape under its own power!"

Ves grimaced. Fe Nitaa sure knew a lot for a Kinner! How deep was she involved with the Five Scrolls Compact?

Though his mind was roiling in turmoil, the crisis he faced forced him into adopting a more decisive attitude. He suppressed his panic and forcefully asserted control.

This was not the time to run around like a headless chicken!

Seeing that Fe Nitaa not only recognized his status as a Holy Son, but also supplicated herself in front of him without any hesitation, Ves began to take that as a sign that Nitaa might not have any malicious designs on him. He relaxed a bit and tried to assert more control over the situation.

"Tell me your connection to the Compact."

"I was part of the Order of Fl'xix as a trainee. Every trainee comes into contact with the existence of the Compact, although we are very much aware that we are only loosely connected to it. Those who pass will have the opportunity to know more. Those who perform best may even be rewarded with a referral to the Compact."

"What about the failures like you?" Ves asked. "I would have thought that your order would tie up loose ends."

"There is no need for that among Kinners. We have taken an oath not to reveal the existence of the Compact! Failed aspirants such as I are expected to make ourselves available for hire or purchase in order to expand the reach of the order and assist them as long as it does not conflict with my other oaths."

"Then.. why are you so free with me? Aren't you supposed to report me to your old masters?"

"You are the Holy Son. I have always been taught to revere the brothers and sisters of the Five Scrolls Compact over even the most senior members of the order. The hierarchy is clear. Of the Compact, there is no one who is more holy and more deserving of obedience than the Holy Sons and Daughters!"

This was the first time Ves heard of the existence of Holy Daughters. That was a small detail that he buried in his mind.

"I see. I am not connected to the Compact, though."

"It doesn't matter. A Holy Son is a Holy Son!"

Ves understood what was going on. Fe Nitaa essentially exploited a loophole in her oaths and instructions. The question was why.

"You could have chosen to do something else." He stated flatly. "Why betray the intentions of the order and the Compact? Why choose to reveal your cards to me so openly?"

"Because.. I am no longer a formal member of the order." Nitaa admitted.

"Although I have been given a set of instructions, I have no obligation to follow all of their strictures anymore. The order, the Compact... even if I devoted my

life to them, they treated me as a failure and an experiment. If not for my oaths, I would not have left the order peacefully."

Apparently, Fe Nitaa harbored a considerable amount of grievances against the Order of Fl'xix. If she was to be believed, the reason why she was so eager to make use of the loopholes in her oaths was because she wanted to spite the order and the Compact!

Even knowing that Ves was not part of the Compact, she still chose to side with him! In fact, it was better for her that Ves didn't possess any ties to the notorious cult!

The two actually had a lot more in common than Ves anticipated!

While all of this sounded great, Ves never believed in free gifts. Fe Nitaa's odd submission towards him was so convenient that it only stoked his paranoia even further.

Why should he believe Nitaa's story? What if she lied? Although she claimed to abide by her oaths as was expected of a Kinner, what if she wasn't? What if she only pretended to be a Kinner?

Even if she was a Kinner, who said her oath truly allowed her to betray the order to side with Ves?

Chapter 1317 Chains of Disconnec

A huge headache threatened to engulf Ves. When he planned to go on a tour through the star sector, he never expected to confront one of his latent fears in the first leg of his journey!

What was the chance of meeting an agent of Five Scrolls Compact? Extremely low. Yet Ves inadvertently bumped into one just because he wanted to find a personal guard!

To hear that the secretive and mysterious Order of Fl'xix in the Kinner Tribe was actually another splinter organization of the Five Scrolls Compact shocked him immensely.

It made him wonder how many other assets the Compact inserted into other states. Did the Bright Republic have its own branch of the notorious organization?

A shudder went through his back.

Right now, Ves faced a huge dilemma. On the surface, Fe Nitaa spoke truthfully. She expressed complete willingness to place his own interests over the Order of Fl'xix and the Five Scrolls Compact.

According to her, the will of the Holy Sons and Daughters trumped above all. This instruction had been hammered into her over and over again. They were the figureheads of the Compact and the absolute authorities of the expansive cult.

Evidently, despite the immense size of the organization and its loose, cell-like structure, the leadership at the top was very centralized.

The Holy Sons and Daughters had absolute say.

Yet when Fe Nitaa and the other prospective members of the order swore their Kinner oaths, her teachers made a small oversight.

Her first and most important priority is to revere and obey the instructions of the Holy Sons and Daughters.

Her second priority was to revere and obey the instructions of the brothers and sisters of the Five Scrolls Compact.

Her third priority was to obey the instructions of her superiors in the Order of Fl'xix.

The hierarchy here was crystal clear. The Holy Sons and Daughters held absolute control. Their direct instructions superseded every existing arrangement.

Yet these simple instructions came with a very significant hole. It was a mistake typically made in programming where the programmer in question failed to account for an unlikely but faintly possible scenario.

What if the Holy Son or Holy Daughter did not belong to the Compact? What if they were enemies?

The brothers and sisters of the Compact should have known that some of the Scrolls landed in the hands of others. In particular, the CFA and MTA should have obtained the Fire Scroll when they supposedly rebelled against the secretive organization that used to control humanity behind the scenes.

Ves decided to ask this question directly.

"Fe Nitaa. Your instructions supposedly compel you to obey a Holy Son over the rest of the Compact. I understand that the implication of this instruction is that a Holy Son or Daughter is always a part of the Compact, but what if this is not the case, like now?"

A short silence stretched.

"I.. I do not think the leaders of our order ever contemplated this possibility. We hear very little about the core secrets of the Compact. To be honest, this is the first time I've learnt that a Holy Son exists that is not aligned with the Compact!"

After a brief round of questioning, Ves clarified the situation a little.

The Order of Fl'xix may be an influential organization in the Kinner Tribe, but it was a non-entity in the larger scheme of things.

The Kinner Tribe was one of the smaller and weaker third-rate states in the star sector. The Komodo Star Sector itself was one of the most remote and underdeveloped star sectors in human space.

To a behemoth like the Five Scrolls Compact which was likely the third-most powerful trans-galactic organization in human space, how much attention did they really pay to their cat's paws?

Perhaps not even the regional leaders of the Compact in the star sector knew the order even existed!

From what Ves could surmise from his prior encounters, the Compact operated an extensive network of offshoot organizations.

The Church of Haatumak, the Angel's Wing Foundation and now the Order of Fl'xix. All of these organizations and more served as the low-cost eyes and ears of the Compact.

Their loose, distant and indirect connection to the Compact turned them into disposable entities that could instantly be cut off whenever they became exposed.

It was also due to their low importance that the Compact never filled them in with all of the core secrets of the cult!

Ves tested this out by asking her whether she knew the whereabouts of the Fire Scroll.

"I don't know. Such information is never passed to lowly ones like me." Fe Nitaa shook her head. "My fellow trainees and I always presumed they were safely in the hands of the Holy Sons and Daughters hiding in the galactic center. There was no conceivable way we would ever suspect that the most eminent leaders of the Compact would ever stray into the galactic rim!"

So his guess was right! The Order of Fl'xix or at least their trainees never knew that the Compact lost most of its Sacred Scrolls!

While this was a major oversight on the part of the Compact, in practice it was unlikely to bite them in the butt. What were the odds this unimportant order would ever come into contact with the Holy Son of an enemy faction?

It was too ridiculous to contemplate!

A combination of laziness, excessive secrecy and lack of investment meant that the Order of Fl'xix had never been prepared to face an existence like Ves!

Certainly, due to the persecution of the Big Two, the Five Scrolls Compact was forced to adopt a decentralized, cell-like organizational structure throughout the galaxy.

It established numerous regional cells, each of which would not harm the main organization if they ever got uprooted by the relentless hunters of the MTA and CFA.

These cells in turn set up their own cells throughout the star sectors they occupied in the form of offshoot or splinter organizations. The additional layer of disconnect meant that these disguised organizations lacked much of the knowledge that a typical brother and sister of the Compact possessed.

"Has the Compact truly never thought about instructing the order and other offshoot organizations of the existence of enemy Holy Sons?" Ves frowned.

Nitaa shook her head. She stopped supplicating completely, but still remained on her knees. "From what I've learned from my basic teachings about the Compact, the Sacred Scrolls are more than scrolls. Their material forms are just containers of an immensely powerful artifact that is capable of thinking for itself! They have always chosen their Holy Sons from among the Compact!"

This was a very interesting detail! If true, that meant that even if the CFA and MTA got their hands on a scroll, it might not be a given that they would have their own Holy Son!

As for the claim that the Scrolls were self-thinking, Ves already accepted it. The System's very existence confirmed it. Perhaps the only point of doubt was why the System did not seem so eager to reunite with the Compact.

That was a question for another day.

He turned to another issue that caused him to feel some doubt. "For someone who knows so little, you still managed to determine that I'm a Holy Son. Earlier, you said you received a message in your mind. What was that all about?"

"When I turned my attention to you back when I was at the sparring ring, I directed the senses of my special nose at you. I immediately encountered a very strange and overpowering presence that was mixed in your scent. As I explored it further, I received a direct message in my mind. It told me that you were a Holy Son."

Ves frowned. "Directly? In plain standard language?"

She nodded. "The message was loud and clear. It left no room for doubt."

Another grimace appeared on his face. He sure did not transmit such messages himself, and Lucky would never pull off a stunt like that. This left only one remaining self-thinking entity on his person who could have conveyed this very message.

The System!

For all these years, Ves had grown used to the System's inaction. It seemed content to act out the role of an impersonal, passive virtual interface.

He treated the System like a virtual shop front, essentially. As long as Ves did not spend his DP, he always assumed the System went dormant and never acted out on its own initiative.

This time was different. If his suspicions were correct, then the System proactively reached out to Fe Nitaa, directly spilling one of its user's secrets!

The worst part about it was that the System acted without his express consent!

The thought of it made him want to tear his hair out!

It was as if the Barracuda suddenly gained a mind of her own decided to crash into the sun instead of existing a star system!

Ves could not blame the System for acting against his own interest. This time, it probably did the both of them a huge favor!

Yet just because he benefited this time did not mean the next time would be the same.

Ves always believed the System never acted in his interest. Instead, it pursued its own goals!

For now, both of their goals aligned with each other, but how long would it last? One day, decades or centuries from now, their priorities might diverge. What would happen then?

He would have to be stronger than the System by the time this fateful moment took place. Otherwise, he could forget about surviving the System's betrayal!

Whether the System would ever do so, Ves didn't know, but he never discounted the possibility that the worst might happen one day! His paranoia didn't allow him to dismiss this potential threat!

"What a headache." He shook his head and turned his attention back to the present. "Okay, I understand what went on. It seems my disobedient little 'Sacred Scroll' decided to spill the beans."

The worship in Fe Nitaa's eyes intensified. How could she not revere him?! Each Sacred Scroll was a mythical entity that lowly ones like her would never have the privilege to be in contact with in their lives! To encounter a Holy Son in the wild all of a sudden uprooted all of her assumptions!

Though Ves wasn't sure yet whether Nitaa told the truth and sincerely cooperated with him, he became more inclined to believe him. The System wouldn't reach out to someone at random.

In effect, Nitaa already carried the System's seal of approval.

That wasn't quite enough for him, though, considering that Ves didn't fully trust it in the first place.

He turned to Lucky, who had always remained alert and onguard in the air ever since Ves became distressed.

"Lucky? What do you think about Nitaa? Do you think she tried to deceive me in any way?"

"Meow."

"No?"

"Meow."

"She's sincere?"

Even Lucky vouched for Nitaa's honesty, which was a huge point in her favor. Although he couldn't explain why, Ves trusted Lucky more than the System!

With all signs pointing out that Nitaa was being honest, Ves finally let down his guard a bit.

He reluctantly embraced the assumption that Nitaa was just as she said, a former member of a splinter organization of a regional cell of the Five Scrolls Compact.

"Tell me one thing, Nitaa. Are more people capable of sniffing me out?"

"I don't know the answer to that question, Your Holiness." She shook her head. "The experiment was so unsuccessful that the visiting Compact researcher aborted it when it kept producing failures. In truth.. he may have been too impatient. A year after the experiment, my nose transformed. By concentrating my mind on my nose, I managed to empower it in some way that allows me to smell scents that I never knew existed!"

This may have been the ultimate goal of the experiment! The Five Scrolls Compact may have wanted to develop a nose like the one that Nitaa possessed in order to track down the Metal Scroll, which they might have suspected hadn't been destroyed at all!

Though the researcher presumed the experiment failed, what if that wasn't true? What if other survivors of the experiment like Fe Nitaa possessed the same ability?

Also, the Compact researcher was just one among many. What if other brothers and sisters of the Compact engaged in similar research? What if one of them succeeded?

Perhaps right now, the Compact might be spreading human bloodhounds throughout the entire region in order to catch him in a net!

Chapter 1318 Spicy Snack

Fe Nitaa was so low on the totem pole that she knew nothing about the intentions of the Five Scrolls Compact in the region.

"I'm just an experimental subject to the Order of Fl'xix, and a failed one at that." She raised her eyes. "However, if you wish to avoid detection from others like me, perhaps I can help."

That caught his attention. "How so?"

"There are ways to interfere with my special sense of smell."

The two began to dive in deeper on the nature of her so-called special nose.

From what Nitaa could tell, the experiment performed on her messed with her olfactory senses. Her nose had been modified to sense smells that ordinary people could never sense.

At least that was the intention. For some reason, this ability came online months after the Compact researcher declared his experiment to be a failure.

"What is the nature of the new smells that you're able to sense with your empowered nose?"

"I don't know. All I know is that I am not smelling something in the air, but something that exists in another medium. I know this because I've smelled something unusual even when I'm wearing an airtight vacsuit in space."

It might be spirituality that she sensed!

Ves decided to put this assumption to the test. He flared out his Spirituality, causing him to be surrounded by a nearly-perceptible aura.

"Do you sense anything different about me right now?"

She frowned. "No.. I do sense something, but not with my nose."

Then how did her special nose even work?! If she didn't smell any physical or spiritual scents, then what was it about him that triggered her olfactory senses?!

"Your Holiness, although I am unable to explain how my special nose works, I can tell you that other objects trigger it as well. You may be able to mislead those with similar senses like me by masking your 'scent' with other overpowering smells."

Ves easily understood her suggestion. It was just like jamming a sensor by blasting it with noise and junk data. The only difference here was that the jamming happened through a mysterious medium instead of conventional signals.

"What kind of smell can mask my scent?"

He eagerly needed to know the answer in order to take steps to avoid the Compact's sweeping search!

"Spicy Nyx dogs."

"...What?"

"Spicy Nyx dogs. It's a variation of the classic hot dog, and it's a specialty in the Nyxian Gap. After I developed my special nose, I began to explore all over Bloodstone in order to see what triggers my smell. Aside from sensing something unusual from a small amount of random, seemingly unconnected people, I also encountered a number of anomalous smells from other sources."

"What makes these spicy Nyx dogs so special to you, then?"

"Their scent is overpowering. Although I would have to be close to detect them, once they enter the range of my nose, I'm hit with a burst of intensity that is unlike anything else I've smelled! Anyone who eats one will continue to carry its scents for days!"

While Ves never heard of spicy Nyx dogs before, it was a prevalent snack in the Nyxian Gap. So much so that it even spread throughout the 'lower' half of the Komodo Star Sector.

"After I began to investigate this snack, I found out that only a small number of them triggered my special nose. The majority of the spicy Nyx dogs sold on Bloodstone elicited no reaction."

Ves chuckled. "Because they're fake, right?"

"Right. The most authentic recipe calls for using a blend of spices native to the Nyxian Gap. One of the spices responsible for adding most of the heat happens to be geril spice. It's difficult to come by in the Kinner Tribe, and it's so expensive that most food vendors resort to substitute blends that are sourced locally."

"I see. So the key is geril spice. As long as I eat a spicy Nyx dog or something else flavored with geril spice, I can mask the scent of my 'Sacred Scroll'?"

"That is my guess, Your Holiness. I am unsure whether it works, but even now, my memory of the intensity of its smell is significantly more powerful than your current scent."

Though Ves was unsure if her special nose worked that way, it was worth a try!

If her suggestion worked, then Ves had a very effective way of misleading the Compact's efforts to track down the Metal Scroll.

Unfortunately, while it might delay detection, it did not solve the problem entirely. People who came in touch with geril spice and other substances that overpowered the special nose they developed would definitely attract closer scrutiny.

If the Compact ever performed a follow-up investigation, then eating a dozen spicy Nyx dogs a day might not be enough to keep him out of their reach forever!

However, that was a problem for another day. Right now, Ves focused on avoiding the initial sweep. As long as he did not get caught immediately, he would have plenty of time to figure out how to avoid the subsequent investigations!

He turned his gaze back to the kneeling woman. Despite being taller and more physically imposing than him, Fe Nitaa utterly showed no hint of dominance towards him. In fact, Ves happened to be the one that loomed over her like a master inspecting a slave!

"Oh, stand up already."

She did so, forcing Ves to crane his neck upwards in order to meet her eyes.

He never considered himself to be too short or too tall, but in this instance, Ves felt very insecure about his height for some reason!

He liked it a lot better if Nitaa kept kneeling!

Still, it would be awfully petty of him to order her back to her knees.

A sigh of exasperation escaped his lips. "Alright, that's enough for now. This isn't exactly the most secure place to talk. Let's resume this discussion for another time."

"If that is your wish, Your Holiness."

"Don't call me that! Exercise some prudence, please! Either in public or in private, it's unacceptable to refer to me as the Holy Son. No one except myself, Lucky and a handful of other people know the truth. Everyone else is in the dark, including my closest companions."

"I understand. I will address you as if you are a normal employers, Mr. Larkinson."

Ves smiled. "That's better. Let's head back out and meet with Gavin and Kelandra before they think we are doing something untoward. We'll handle your contract as well."

At this point, Ves implicitly accepted the existence of Fe Nitaa in his life. Though she possessed a definite connection to the Compact, he believed her when she stated that she held no loyalty towards the cult or the Order of Fl'xix.

Multiple sources aside from herself backed up this assumption. Even his intuition hinted that Fe Nitaa did not harbor any ill intent towards him, at least consciously.

That still didn't rule out more exotic possibilities. Perhaps she had been bio-programmed to act as a deep cover spy in his circle. Once she encountered a trigger, her entire personality might flip from a seemingly honest servant into a dastardly Compact agent.

Still, how likely was this true? Ves did not wish to entertain endless suspicions. Though he planned to perform some additional investigations, he was highly inclined towards making a leap of faith and put his trust in Fe Nitaa.

"Lucky, you can deactivate your ECM field now."

"Meow."

Once Ves, Lucky and Fe Nitaa emerged from the conference room, they met a small crowd of bewildered-looking people.

"You sure took your time in there, boss." Gavin began. "Are you.."

"Let's move on with forming Miss Nitaa's employment contract." Ves quickly waved his hand. "I've agreed to buy her out as my personal bodyguard."

It didn't matter what Ves said because Nitaa would agree to his words regardless.

Though Gavin kept looking at him in a funny manner, they eventually moved to a different and smaller office space in order to hammer out the terms of the contract.

Half an hour passed by as the contract author served up a standard model contract and modified it to suit the current circumstances.

Overall, Ves did not suggest any significant changes. He even demanded he pay the full market value of buying out a personal bodyguard of Fe Nitaa's caliber, which amounted to the equivalent of 60 million bright credits.

This was a rather steep price, but then again the loyalty of a competent Kinner bodyguard made up of at least eighty percent of that number!

Ves could have saved himself enough money to buy an extra premium mech. Fe Nitaa would not have objected if he bought her for just a single bright credit.

He would never do such a stupid thing. Not only would such an event be incredibly news worthy, thereby attracting a lot of unwelcome attention to the transaction, but it would also thoroughly offend the Kinner tribesmen!

Valuing one of their own at such a price was the equivalent of saying that a Kinner was worth as much as a nutrient pack!

Every Kinner who recognized him on the streets would beat him up!

Nonetheless, Nitaa showed obvious discomfort. The market price for her eternal service was way too much to the woman in question! Ves already had the right to command her for free!

"This might be more money than you have ever handled in your life, but did you forget who I am?" Ves pointed his thumb at himself. "I'm a mech designer! I can earn this much money in my sleep!"

"..If you say so, Mr. Larkinson."

After concluding a completely standard contract with no abnormal clauses, no one should have cause to scrutinize or object to the trade. Once Ves and Nitaa signed the virtual document, the latter kneeled down in front of her new employer to swear her Kinner oaths, as was tradition.

"I pledge to serve you in the Kinner ways, to uphold your wellbeing and interest over others..."

"I swear to prioritize your life over my own, and will not hesitate to reactively and proactively protect you against any possible threats..."

"I acknowledge that I will always be a Kinner and hold on to the customs and traditions of my tribe..."

Each oath was different as the Kinnners weren't really good at sticking to the exact same forms. However, every Kinner generally stuck to the same points, as was required by tradition.

Just like Ves, Fe Nitaa did not stray from the convention. She did not show Ves any abnormal favor and merely made a standard pledge to bind herself to Ves while affirming her rights as a Kinner.

At the end of the brief but solemn ritual, Ves gained his first Kinner.

He felt very strange about it. Though he merely acquired the services of a permanent employee, it felt a lot like buying a slave.

Fortunately, everyone was happy with the trade. The contract lawyer smiled and shook everyone's hands before he left. As the person who facilitated the transaction on behalf of the tribe, he stood to earn a tidy commission.

Kelandra looked relieved as well. She turned towards Nitaa and patted her shoulders. "I'm glad you did not sell yourself away for a pittance."

"I can give it back to my owner." Nitaa flatly replied.

"What! You shouldn't!"

As Kelandra pulled Nitaa aside to give her fellow Kinner a stern lecture, Gavin approached Ves.

"Is there something funny going on between you and your new hire?"

"No. There's nothing going on."

"Then why did you hire her? She's not even that good compared to the other bodyguards for hire!"

"That can always be changed as long as I invest in her training. I believe that anyone can be trained to become an elite as long as they receive sufficient investment. I favored Nitaa over the other possible candidates because of her unrestrained loyalty and other qualities that can't be improved no matter how much money I throw at them. Some traits can only be stumbled upon, not found."

Encountering a discarded asset that used to be tied to the Compact was an amazingly opportune find! Even though it took a push from the System to pull them together, Ves carefully embraced this development.

The only problem was that Gavin kept looking at him in a weird fashion. "Uh. huh. Whatever you say, boss. Just make sure you square it away with Gloriana. She might not be pleased when she hears about what you've done!"

Ves look confused. "What does she have to do with this?"

Chapter 1319 Craving for Dog

After concluding the transaction, Fe Nitaa formally entered into Ves' service. From now on, she was sworn to serve him as a loyal Kinner bondswoman.

The only way she would leave his service was if he crossed the few lines that shouldn't be crossed. Among them was deliberately driving Kinnners to their deaths or harming their children.

Another notable rule that Ves needed to abide by in order to retain the loyalty of his Kinnners that he could not make overt moves against the Kinner Tribe. Any action that harmed the interests of the state would be met with heavy disapproval from the Kinnners in his service.

If the transgression happened to be severe enough, then the Kinner bondsmen had the right to set aside their oaths and pledges and leave his service!

This was a very impactful rule, because it tied the hands of many people!

How many people employed Kinner bondsmen? A lot. Once they bought out a Kinner, they effectively renounced any possibility of launching any attacks against the Kinner Tribe.

This single restriction was one of the most prevalent means of protecting the Kinner Tribe. As long as they kept selling their Kinnners to every influential person in the star sector, hardly any state could muster up the support to attack the Kinner Tribe directly!

Although his move to buy out Fe Nitaa was partially a sham, the oaths she swore were very real.

If Ves ever forced her to choose between her loyalty to a Holy Son or her loyalty to the tribe, she would fall into an incredibly difficult dilemma.

It was best if Ves never pushed her to this point!

Ves, Gavin, Lucky and Kelandra waited for a half hour more for Nitaa to finish her business. Now that she sold herself to Ves, she needed to check out of

Trinity Halls, pack her luggage, get her paperwork in order and bid farewell to her acquaintances.

During the wait, Kelandra wore a sour face. She did not seem pleased at Nitaa's abnormal reaction to Ves.

"I hope you don't mistreat Miss Nitaa, Mr. Larkinson. She is an unfortunate woman who has never been right in the head ever since the Fl'ixians kicked her out of the order."

What did Kelandra think he was, a slavedriver?!

"You don't have to be concerned. I plan to employ multiple Kinners, remember? They'll keep each other company and make sure that they're treated right!"

The excuse was enough to placate their guide.

Once Nitaa returned, she positioned herself behind Ves, making it abundantly clear that she had begun her duty.

"I think I've had enough for the moment." Ves spoke. "Let's take a break before I resume my search for other positions to fill."

"Where would you like to go?" Kelandra asked.

"I'm feeling a bit hungry. Is there a notable food market nearby?"

"There is one not too far away. Many clients and Kinners here at Trinity Halls frequent the stalls when they are hungry."

The group did not need to take an aircar this time as the distance was only a couple of minutes way on foot. As they exited the premises of Trinity Hall and neared the bustling food market, they looked no different from any other well-heeled tourists.

"We Kinners love food." Kelandra said as she guided them to a stall that sold candy made on the spot. "After many years of subsiding on nutrient packs and other cheap food in our distant past, we have developed a craving for real food."

An old Kinner smiled at them as he manipulated the controls of his machine to produce a unique blend of flavors into a single piece of solid hard candy.

"While Bloodstone offers many restaurants that offer fine dining experiences that are not too shabby, most Kinners like to eat out in the streets."

Their guide gestured her arm down the street, which was filled with rickety, dusty stalls. Various chefs and vendors cooked up authentic meals using simple ovens and furnaces.

Despite the somewhat shabby cooking progress, lots of Kinners happily sat on the cheap chairs as they ate their hearty meals.

A wonderful blend of aromas suffused the air. Ves' nose constantly twitched as his mouth started to leak saliva.

He quickly shook his head and wiped his mouth. This was not the time to give in to temptation! He was here for only one goal!

"Ahem. Let's tour the market. Perhaps I'll find something yummy enough to eat."

Though the market streets were rather tight and crowded at some places, giving Fe Nitaa an immediate problem in ensuring his safety, Ves liked the atmosphere. No pretentiousness could be found among the patrons as they each let down their guards and enjoyed their meals.

"Some of the food here is cooked with love." He said with a smile.

This spoke right to the heart of his own design philosophy. Although Ves was incomparable to a mere street chef, they both worked to satisfy their customers.

Some of the local Kinner chefs at the market were passionate about their craft. They cooked with a smile and prepared their meals with gusto.

Despite the effort they put into their cooking, they never charged excessive prices for their items. This was not a fancy market and the vast majority of patrons consisted of local residents.

Yet Kelandra was right that Kinnners loved food. Aside from selling local Kinner staple foods, many vendors also served foreign delicacies.

Gavin bumped his elbow against Ves. "Hey, look at that stall! Isn't that our cloud rice?!"

The group drifted over to a stall that sold fried rice bowls. A steamy and oily aroma overcame their noses as they stared at the chef tossing his big, dented wok.

Ves and Gavin both shook their heads after a few seconds. "It's fake."

There was no way authentic cloud rice would be sold this cheap at a street stall. The true cloud rice was a premium staple that already cost a fair bit to eat on Bentheim, let alone import to a state on the other side of the star sector!

While Ves couldn't figure out what kind of rice the stall was using, he was familiar enough with the real thing that it couldn't be the same.

Neither of them made a fuss about it, though. That would only land themselves into trouble over a cause that neither of them cared about. The two turned away from the stall lest they developed a greater animosity

towards the Kinner who thought it was a good idea to butcher one of their local specialty products.

"It's an unfortunate fact that many of the specialty foods sold here use adapted recipes." Nitaa spoke out on her own accord, relaying the results of her own prior research. "We Kinner have fallen in love with regional specialties, but that doesn't mean we are willing to pay half of our daily wages to enjoy a meal."

In order to meet the expanding palates of their customers, the enterprising Kinner chefs resorted to substitute ingredients.

For this reason, a lot of pricy specialties were sold at just a tenth or just a hundredth of their actual worth!

"Do all of these Kinner even know they're eating unauthentic versions?" Gavin frowned.

The deception taking place in this market went a bit too far even from him! Chefs could get into real trouble if they pulled something like this off in the Bright Republic!

"Our people are not very.. refined." Kelandra stated. "If we never tasted the authentic version, how would we know if we are eating fakes? Besides, plenty of chefs here state that they are using their own recipes instead of the classic ones."

Ves shook his head. "It's still a form of misrepresentation. Do the customers here even know they are eating imitation meals?"

"When I looked into it, I found out that they aren't particularly interested in finding out the truth." Nitaa spoke from behind. "Whenever I confronted someone with the facts, they took offence. It can be a very prickly matter to expose that they weren't consuming the real thing for many years."

"Then how do the authentic recipes even get sold here if all these fakes are undercutting their prices?"

Nitaa smiled and gestured at one of the less-frequented stalls. "There are certain Kinners and plenty of foreigners who can tell the real from the fake. Look at the chefs charging vastly more for their meals."

Though not a lot of customers frequented the stall, it nonetheless served a small handful of customers, which meant that it was doing good business.

As Ves looked around and spotted similar stalls around him, he noticed that most of them were frequented by better-dressed Kinners as well as foreigners.

"I see." Ves murmured. "It's kind of an open secret, then. Those who can't afford anything better can enjoy the illusion of eating foreign delicacies. Those who are more informed usually have the money to afford the meals cooked with authentic ingredients."

Something like this would never take place in the mech market on a wide scale. While counterfeit mechs did exist and sold at significant numbers in the underground markets, everyone who bought them knew what they were getting.

Buying a mech on the black market that was thirty to fifty percent cheaper than the legal version meant that the buyer certainly knew that some corners had been cut!

Instances where mech buyers got fooled into buying a counterfeit mech while paying the price of an authentic version happened very infrequently.

Any mech buyer knew that their mechs should come with MTA certification. Counterfeit mechs didn't come with this essential proof.

Ves didn't ask why the local Kinner authorities refused to crack down on the chefs that were lying to their customers. This kind of deception may not be entirely ethical, but it was largely harmless seeing that the customers all enjoyed their meals.

As the group slowly meandered through the varied food offerings, Ves began to engage in casual conversation with his bodyguard.

His decision to hire her was rather abrupt, after all. They barely knew each other for more than an hour!

"Where do you come from, Nitaa?"

"Bloodstone." The tall woman grunted. "Born and raised here all my life, Mr. Larkinson. I'm a vatter."

"That's the local slang for a Kinner born from a facility that houses thousands of artificial wombs." Kelandra added.

Ves found that to be rather remarkable. He also held a presumption that people who lived monotonous lives were less likely to develop spirituality.

Yet this rule was anything but set in stone. Despite Nitaa's low birth and basic upbringing, she nonetheless managed to develop a hint of spirituality with a quality that Ves hadn't seen before.

Ves had closely studied it during their initial meeting. Her small but vigorous pool of spiritual energy had interacted with her nose, which must have been the primary reason why she could tell he was someone unusual.

"There is not much to tell about my youth." Nitaa shrugged. "I grew up like any other young Kinner in one of the camps. I mostly played with my fellow yearmates back then. When I reached ten, I was disappointed to learn that I couldn't pilot mechs, but I kind of already assumed this outcome so I quickly

got over it. I still wanted to become a fighter, though, so I applied for combat training."

Nitaa had actually been a good performer when she began her combat classes. So much so that the Order of Fl'ix took a liking for her for some reason and added her to the next batch of trainees.

As for what happened after that, Ves already knew. Her training results began to slip as the order kept demanding more out of their growing trainees.

Ves didn't ask why she failed to keep up. This must be a very sensitive topic for her and a busy market wasn't the place to air out something so personal.

At this time, Ves finally spotted what appeared to be a hot dog stand. However, what was different was that aside from selling regular buns with meat, it also sold various other variations as well, one of which happened to be the spicy Nyx dogs that he craved!

In fact, the tangy, hot smell of a fresh spicy Nyx dog happened to pass through his nose!

Strong! Spicy! Hot!

No wonder Nitaa suggested that it might be strong enough to overpower his 'System scent'!

"I don't know about you guys, but that smells great!"

Chapter 1320 Lackluster Choice

As Ves took a bite of the bun, a ball of spice exploded in his mouth!

"Hot!"

A mixture of spices prickled his mouth and barraged his tongue with a grand feast. Chief among them was the much-anticipated geril spice.

The taste of it was indescribable. All he knew was that his mouth would faintly carry the odor for hours if he didn't cleanse his mouth afterwards!

While everyone else enjoyed their spicy Nyx dogs, Ves quietly tried to analyze his food.

What was it about geril spice that made it so exceptional?

His spiritual senses revealed nothing of note. However it worked, it did not do so on a spiritual level.

While its material properties were already quite remarkable, Ves doubted that any of them served as the key to its ability to overwhelm Fe Nitaa's special nose.

He needed to perform some thorough research.

"Benny." He said after swallowing a bite of spicy Nyx dog. "Please inquire where we can buy the Nyx dogs or more preferably the ingredients in bulk. I've taken a liking for this snack."

"Uh, pardon?"

"Am I not clear? I've fallen in love with spicy Nyx dogs! Let's bring it back to the Bright Republic! It's best if you order a container's worth of ingredients or more!"

Though Gavin looked bewildered by Ves' sudden love for a peculiar but relatively simple hot dog variation, he nonetheless did as ordered.

Initially, the food vendor adamantly refused to divulge his source. No one liked to facilitate a competitor, after all.

It was only when Ves urged Gavin to pull all the stops did the negotiations proceed.

Anything could be bought with money. After offering a modest bribe and a very generous commission, Gavin negotiated a deal for a single container's worth of ingredients.

Several barrels filled with geril spice happened to be included as well, though it was by far the most expensive ingredient.

When Gavin returned to Ves, he shook his head. "I don't know why you're so insistent on getting the ingredients for spicy Nyx dogs. The vendor knew you were rich enough to care nothing about the expense, so he drove a hard bargain. I think we must have overpaid for the ingredients by a factor of ten!

How could this paltry amount of money ever compare to evading the nosy hunters of the dreaded Five Scrolls Compact? Let alone spending a few hundred-thousand bright credits, he would gladly pay a billion credits to secure the ingredients!

"Some pleasures in life are worth pursuing. Who knows if I can find any authentic spicy Nyx dogs when I return to the Bright Republic? Make sure the vendor arranges the delivery of authentic ingredients to the Barracuda. With how much we're paying, I absolutely don't want to see any fakes. Hire a food inspector if needed in order to verify that nothing is amiss."

The weird emphasis on spicy Nyx dogs confused Gavin to no end, but he did as instructed.

To her credit, Kelandra managed to maintain a polite facade. She had dealt with plenty of eccentric clients.

"Do you wish to explore the food market any further?"

"No thanks. I've already seen most of what it has to offer. Let's go."

The group began to exit the food market and return to Trinity Halls. While finding Fe Nitaa had been an unexpected find for him, he still intended to expand his staff by at least another hire.

He definitely couldn't do without a spymaster! This might be the only opportunity in years for him to hire a reliable Kinner spy or security expert, so he definitely couldn't leave empty-handed!

During the journey back to the halls, Ves casually drifted over to Nitaa by slowing down his pace.

"Are there any others like you at Trinity Halls?"

Nitaa nodded. "Order rejects like me are not uncommon, sir. I am unsure of their priorities, however. Not all are resentful of the Fl'ixians after they had been rejected. Hiring them on without ascertaining their true sentiments is.. not wise."

"I understand. Are you able to detect anyone that shares your.. former loyalties?"

He didn't refer to the Order of Fl'ix this time. Fe Nitaa should be clever enough to figure out his true meaning.

She shook her head. "Not as much as I wish. We come in many forms. Disguising my true self is a habit that I've learned by heart."

"Does that mean that anyone from the 'order' can sneak into my employ without me getting the wiser?"

"I am capable of detecting most of those who have been trained by the order. I'm also capable of recognizing those who possess the same enhancements as mine. As for those who are only related to the order, they come in so many forms that I cannot guarantee that I can identify them in a crowd."

In other words, Nitaa could detect other members of the order as well as the humans employed as bloodhounds by the Compact. She couldn't detect the brothers and sisters of the Compact, though, which was a big shame, because Ves feared them the most.

Nonetheless, he shouldn't look at a gift horse in the mouth. Nitaa brought a lot to the table. Aside from her detection capabilities, she also possessed a deeper insight into the Five Scrolls Compact than other people.

Ves definitely intended to question her about the Compact in further detail once they had some time alone!

Considering Nitaa's peculiar spiritual attribute, Ves became reasonably confident he could detect others like her. That did not mean she was redundant, as Ves could not keep up his spiritual senses active all the time without expending his reserves.

Once they returned to Trinity Hall, Kelandra guided them to the third floor of the main hall. She led them to the back of the hall where a number of virtual security experts, hackers and other people with related professions lingered.

"Did you take us to the right place?" Ves asked.

His words caused Kelandra to smirk.

"Please recall who you wish to hire. Would anyone of their ilk broadcast their capabilities?"

Of course not. A spy would have a much harder time to do their jobs if their identities were in the open!

"How many of them are here?"

"Not much, Mr. Larkinson. Perhaps one out of twenty among the job seekers are the ones you wish to find."

"Then how will we know we got the right one?"

"Leave that to me." Kelandra smiled.

This was the benefit of hiring an insider. Ves didn't know how she managed it, but she began to guide the group towards specific individuals sitting or standing in wait to appeal to a potential client.

At least half of the job seekers consisted of foreigners, though. Since Ves firmly wanted to obtain a Kinner spy, that did not leave him with much choice.

"Don't expect too much from the ones who have been waiting here for a while. Very keen employers already took the good ones away." Kelandra warned.

"I'm aware."

The search and negotiation for Kinner spies turned out to be a very subtle dance. Neither Ves, Kelandra or the prospective hires mentioned the truth. Trinity Halls was a very public venue and it was a given that every interaction would be recorded.

For this reason, on the surface, Ves simply appeared to be on the lookout to hire a mundane virtual security expert. He asked relatively standard questions while the men and women looking to get hired by a rich mech designer did their best to showcase their actual skill without giving away any clues about their true vocation.

Most of the spies also tended to be on the younger side. Their lack of experience meant that they did not have any prior ties to other employers, which was good.

Less good was judging their actual competence. Without a track record, Ves found it difficult to evaluate how much they exaggerated their capabilities.

His visit to the food market earlier in the day taught him that Kinner were still capable of lying.

The aid of both Nitaa and Kelandra proved to be invaluable.

His guide had a better sense of judging the truth coming out of the mouth of her fellow Kinners. She possessed an abundant amount of experience in helping clients, so she could tell when a prospective hire went too far with their boasts.

As for Nitaa, her tall presence was sufficient to restrain the job seekers. The intricate tattoos on her face made it clear that she used to be a part of the Order of Fl'xix, which commanded a lot of respect and apprehension from the Kinners.

After interviewing the handful of spies hidden in the crowd of security experts, Kelandra could find no more.

"That's not all of them." She said with a mild frown. "There are more people in their midst who might be interesting to you. It is just that they refused to expose themselves."

Just like with Commander Oryn Mair, they looked down on Ves. He lacked the reputation or institutional weight to reassure their concerns.

Every Kinner wanted to latch on to winners but especially to known quantities. Someone like Ves who emerged fairly recently did not have the track record to prove that he would be a stable employer.

For all they knew, the new boss they promised to serve for the rest of his life might go bankrupt next year, putting all of them on the streets!

His ample connections played much less of a role than he anticipated. What did it matter if his girlfriend was a notable member of the Wodin Dynasty? Partnerships and alliances always ended at the most inconvenient times.

If Ves lost the protection of others, how well would he be able to fare in the galaxy by himself?

He was still confident he could make it somehow, but the spies looking to serve a master lacked the same confidence. For this reason, Ves could only choose among a paltry selection of six spies.

Each of them were rather bland and unexceptional. While being unassuming was definitely an asset to spies, none of them inspired a lot of confidence in Ves. At best, they might be able to hold their ground against Leland.

His hopes of finding a hidden gem who might possibly stand equal against Calabast were dashed.

He should have known better.

"Are there any other places where I can obtain what I want?"

"I doubt it." Kelandra replied. "More exclusive venues exist, but they will not open their doors to you. Only the most generous and loyal clients are eligible to receive invitations."

"What about places similar to Trinity Halls?"

"I would not advise you to frequent those venues. Every person at Trinity Halls is vetted by the Kinner Tribe. The other establishments do not offer the same level of assurance."

Bloodstone was a huge planet, and the amount of Kinner educated as spies looking for employment was quite considerable.

It was just that most of them had already been taken away by foreign organizations in need of extremely loyal spies. What Ves essentially got was a selection of their leftovers.

He sighed. "While I'm sure they're competent, none of them stand out to me. I might as well leave the decision to my cat."

"Meow?"

"That's right, Lucky. You get to choose! Which one do you like the most?"

"Meow."

Lucky carefully extended his paw towards a thin, reedy man.

"What do you think, Nitaa?"

"I don't detect anything of note that raises my concern."

Neither Lucky or Nitaa expressed any misgivings about the man, though they didn't look very enthusiastic either. The choice was merely.. Sufficient.

Enough to fulfill the job, but nothing more.

One of the biggest disappointments to Ves was that none of the prospective hires possessed any noticeable spirituality. While he could still visit the other job markets to find a spy with spiritual potential, they wouldn't be as reliable despite their Kinner upbringing.

He shrugged. Not every member of his staff needed to be a latent superhuman. Someone like Gavin already proved to be invaluable to him despite his utter normality.

"Alright, let's see if he makes the cut."