

### *Chapter 1321: Glaring Vulnerabilities*

Michael Crindon looked no different from the other computer and virtual security experts among the crowd dressed in business attire.

Of course, none of the other spies gave themselves away. He even wore the same kind of bulked-up comm module on his wrist.

While the ability to blend into a crowd or to assume another identity sounded useful, Ves sought something different.

Ideally, he wanted to get his hands on a spymaster, someone capable of setting up a network of spies and informers that worked on his behalf.

Crindon fell short of that. He was probably a reasonable spy in an individual capacity, but it would take time for him to gain experience and acquire the necessary learning for him to be able to set up a larger organization.

What Crindon did have in his favor was that he was quite competent in the fields counter-intelligence and virtual security. Working with computer systems happened to be one of his specialties, which was something that Ves always felt he lacked among his existing staff and personnel.

Hiring Crindon meant that Ves would immediately be able to put him to work in bolstering the security systems of his ship and many of his gadgets. They'd be much less vulnerable to outside intrusion.

And this was just the start. He intended to invest in all of his personnel. Michael Crindon was young and had plenty of years to earn back his value.

Spies happened to be one of the specialty products of the Kinner Tribe. Their loyalty premium was significantly greater than others!

In fact, he was three times more expensive than Fe Nitaa, which meant that Ves had to fork over the equivalent of 180 million bright credits to buy him out!

"No wonder nobody else snapped him up yet." Ves shook his head.

Anyone who wanted to hire a regular spy could easily do so with a fraction of the cost. Yet how reliable would they turn out to be? The absolute trustworthiness of Kinner tribesmen who pledged to serve their employers afforded them a value that was unsurpassed throughout the star sector!

Just like Nitaa, Crindon shared a similar background. Born as a vatter, he never knew or met his parents. Crindon grew up in a crowded camp on Bloodstone and began to excel in computer-related classes.

This allowed him to transfer to a different institution which specialized in turning Kinner kids into Kinner spies. Aside from gaining competences in the main fields related to spycraft, Crindon further excelled in examining computer systems and protecting them from tampering.

Unfortunately, many other spies excelled much better in these areas than Crindon. While a man like him was always useful, plenty of clients balked at the thought of paying the equivalent of 180 million credits to secure his services.

Even Ves was having second thoughts.

Crindon was perceptive enough to notice that. He smiled at Ves. "Mr. Larkinson, you will not regret buying me out. I am well-versed in detecting potential vulnerabilities. For example, I can see that your mechanical cat is an extremely advanced creation, likely custom-made from the galactic heartland or even the galactic center. However, most of your other gear is not as secure."

"Oh?" Ves raised his eyebrow. "What stands out to you, then?"

"Your smart clothing is a standard Coalition product." Crindon pointed out. "It offers many advanced features, such as allowing you to float in the air. However, did you know that second-class hackers can intrude in its systems with some effort and forcibly disable its antigrav modules?"

A few seconds passed in silence as the horror of this possibility dawned upon Ves!

If anyone hacked his smart clothing while he activated it to reach a floating structure, then he would definitely fall to his death if the altitude was high enough!

"Your holstered pistol appears to be a very expensive custom piece. While the software suite of a custom firearm is always better than that of standard weapons, it is not impossible for someone to pervert its programming. The weapon might misfire upon pulling the trigger, thereby robbing you of your ability to defend yourself!"

Crindon was just getting started!

"The multitool on your toolbelt appears to be extremely advanced. It is definitely not a product from this star sector. Its risk factor is low."

"From the material and appearance of your comm, it's a luxury civilian model. It's a fine product for most working professionals, but a Journeyman like you

belong to a different caliber. I wouldn't be surprised if it's already compromised by half-a-dozen organizations."

"The underlayer vacsuit you're wearing underneath your smart clothing is a standard commercial product. Most people don't think about it, but a vacsuit runs on processors as well. I wouldn't trust its integrity with my life."

Ves felt like he was on the receiving end of what he usually dished out to others as Crindon factually exposed his weaknesses.

The man already started to move onto Nitaa's gear before Ves raised his hand!

"Enough! You have proved your point, Mr. Crindon! Since you are adept at recognizing these vulnerabilities, are you capable of addressing them so they will no longer pose any problems?"

The spy for hire let out a mild smile. "It depends on your budget. Some of your gear, particularly the more expensive ones, are fine as long as I replace their security suites with better ones. As for your cheaper gear.. I highly advise replacing them. Not just your own, but also that of your staff. Everyone in your orbit is a potential vulnerability."

His words rang true. Ves appreciated Crindon's honesty. The Kinner spy did not hesitate in criticizing the glaring vulnerabilities that Ves had always overlooked.

Even if Crindon's spying skills were not very exceptional, his worth as a trusted virtual security expert made it a lot easier for Ves to stomach the 180 million credit price tag!

Though Ves already decided to hire Crindon, he did not show too much enthusiasm on his face. Instead, he turned to Gavin and gestured to his assistant to negotiate a buyout contract.

The negotiations didn't last very long. While Crindon wasn't a pushover like Nitaa, he didn't have that much leeway in setting the terms.

To put it simply, Crindon was essentially a product of the state. This meant the Kinner Tribe essentially reaped the bulk of the payment.

"This is how it works for most Kinner." Kelandra clarified. "Our tribe invested significant resources in his training and upbringing. They expect to earn a healthy profit from his sale."

Considering that the state dictated the terms, Gavin failed to draw down the price. The most he could do was demand some adjustments to the contract to make it a little bit more favorable to Ves.

Once they hashed out the terms, they quickly formalized the contract. Once Ves and Crindon both handled the necessary paperwork, Crindon performed the same ritual as Nitaa did earlier in the day.

Once he finished swearing his loyalty to Ves, he made a very helpful suggestion.

"Before you proceed with anything, I highly advise you replace some of your more vulnerable gear. I know some stores on Bloodstone that sells premium vacsuits and other equipment that is much more secure than what you and your staff are currently using right now."

Since Crindon swore his oath, Ves did not have any qualms in trusting his latest hire's judgement.

"Check with Kelandra to decide where to go. Maybe she has some suggestions as well."

It turned out she did. Both Kelandra and Crindon held different ideas where they should go to buy the most secure gear. In the end, they took an aircar to the nearest store that served well-heeled customers like Journeymen.

The place reminded him of Renny's Outfitters, though it was a bit less classy. Everything was being taken care of by bots. Only a single human manager oversaw the store.

An afternoon went by as Crindon thoughtfully selected replacement gear for Ves, Gavin and Nitaa for equipment that was too vulnerable to patch with software fixes.

As for their more advanced gear, the store also sold various specialty security suites.

With his new boss' approval, Crindon bought plenty of spares for every member of the staff, including himself.

Fashioning Fe Nitaa with an entirely new set of combat gear took up the most time. While her normal gear was already serviceable, Ves could easily afford better.

"I've frequently faced threats to my life." He explained. "While I haven't been targeted directly lately, who knows if this streak will last. I'd rather spend some

of my hard-earned fortune now than regret it later when we find ourselves outmatched and outnumbered."

Though Nitaa expressed some reluctance at the thought of buying expensive, custom combat armor and weapons, she quickly changed her tune once she tried them out.

Ves gave her a budget of 200 million bright credits, because why not. Even converted to the local currency, that was still a lot of money.

In the end, Nitaa opted to purchase a set of concealable light combat armor.

Called the Swiftback, it added a very subtle hump to Nitaa's strong back underneath her formal clothes. Upon a single activation, it could fold out and encompass the Kinner bodyguard's entire body in less than half a second!

Her choice surprised Ves a bit. "I would have thought a big bodyguard like you would opt for something more robust."

"The tougher the armor, the more it slows me down. Although the servos and the anti-grav modules built into the heavier combat armor mitigates this problem, my agility and reaction time will never be as good as now."

In the event of an incident, her main priority was carrying or escorting Ves to safety. The faster she moved, the sooner she was able to drag him behind cover.

Neutralizing the threat wasn't her main priority. She would only fight back when their way was blocked or if there wasn't any other choice.

"I'm not as defenseless as you think." Ves said.

"Meow."

Nitaa violently shook her head. "I would never allow you to come to harm, sir! My life is never as important as yours!"

She would rather die than let a Holy Son come to harm. Ves pressed his lips but let the matter go. She'd learn in time that this mech designer was anything but a toothless coward.

In the meantime, Nitaa continued to outfit herself with other pieces of gear. They didn't buy anything fancy this time as the Swiftback already expended most of the budget that Ves had set.

By the time the group stepped out of the store, Nitaa not only wore the Swiftback under a deceptively-plain suit, but she also hid some premium weapons and gadgets underneath her clothes.

Among the gear she carried was a pair of foldable swords, a pair of laser and ballistic pistols, a multiscanner geared towards detecting and analyzing toxins and more.

Michael Crindon stepped out of the store with his own new set of gear as well. Unlike Nitaa, Ves did not fashion him with an extravagant purchasing budget.

The spy simply made do with a simple-looking but deceptively durable business suit. His outfit offered reasonable protection against distant blasts, environmental hazards and limited weapons fire, but it was no suit of combat armor.

Aside from gearing himself up with some concealed knives and a noiseless ballistic pistol, he also carried a much-slimmer comm. In fact, it looked no different from a civilian-model comm!

Despite its smaller size, it featured much better hacking, security and communication capabilities than his old comm! Most of its internal parts incorporated exotics that vastly improved its processing power, storage capacity and more.

Though Ves inwardly smarted a bit at all the money he spent today, he didn't regret his choices. All of that money wasn't doing anything rotting in his bank account. He might as well trade it away in exchange for vastly improving his physical and virtual security needs!

He should have done this sooner!

### Chapter 1322 Human Products

With two new members on his staff, Ves finally had someone other than Gavin to talk to on a daily basis.

After comprehensively upgrading everyone's gear at Crindon's advice, they retired to the hotel.

They upgraded to a larger hotel suite to accommodate the extra additions. Though Ves could have rented another room for his two Kinner bondsmen, they both suggested they room together in a larger suite.

"If anything happens to you, we'd be able to react in an instant."

Ves still had to get used to the Kinnars he bought. Different from Gavin, the latest two members of his staff didn't have a choice in their employment!

Despite their similar births as Kinner vatters, Fe Nitaa and Michael Crindon both diverged from each other in many aspects.

The Kinner Tribe had been in this business for so long that they became very good at differentiating their human products.

Yet despite their differences, their addition to his staff significantly improved his security situation.

Though Ves would never be able to defend himself against every possible attack, he shouldn't make it easy for his enemies either. Both Kinner bondsmen added valuable expertise to the table that he desperately needed but always held back because of his lack of trust in others.

It said something about him that he only gave in when he had the opportunity to buy some slaves.

Oh, the Kinnners weren't technically slaves. Yet despite all the rules, customs and traditions surrounding their job markets, they were pretty much engaging in a polite form of slave trade.

Instead of shackling their own tribesmen with physical shackles, they instead bound their minds from birth. The Kinnners spent a lot of effort in instilling their distinctive culture into the minds of their childrens. By the time they grew up, their beliefs in the values of the tribe was so strong that they would rather die than betray the tribe!

Still, Ves found it rather odd that the Kinnners managed to succeed so well in keeping every Kinner loyal. Instances of betrayal happened very little.

This made him suspect that the Kinnners might have perverted the genes or bodies of the Kinnners.

Since the Order of Fl'ixix was tied to the Five Scrolls Compact, who could say that the rest of the tribe had been left off?

Ves shook his head. Such a suspicion was a bit spurious, since the MTA and CFA would have found out by now if an entire state was tied to their mutual enemy.

In any case, everyone believed that once a Kinner swore their oaths to someone, their loyalty was virtually assured. Barring obvious abuse or neglect, Ves should be assured that Nitaa and Crindon would never stop serving him for the rest of their lives.

"That still sounds like slavery." He sighed.

In truth, the practices of the Kinner Tribe did not meet with universal approval in the star sector. The notion of buying and selling humans, even if done willingly, reduced them to commodities rather than unique individuals.

One of the few collective values that the overwhelming majority of humanity agreed upon was that they were special!

As a whole, their race was the strongest in the galaxy! Although their individual might and prowess may be negligible compared to the Seven Apex Races, their quantity and birth of exceptional people more than evened out the score!

The huge accomplishments humanity had secured during the Age of Stars and Age of Conquest made every human proud.

This individual pride manifested in a belief that every human, even the most lowliest of space peasants, was worth more than the most exceptional alien leader!

In practice, few people took human supremacy to such extremes. Instead, they took the middle ground and elevated the value of humans slightly above a typical alien race.



Essentially, the prevailing belief was that while humans and aliens were mostly equals, the latter were just a tad bit inferior.

"Humans are still proud of themselves, though." He muttered. "Slave trade is still a taboo, hence why it only takes place outside human space or in a disguised form."

The pirates in the frontier not only found slavery to be acceptable, but they depended upon it to keep their ships, mechs, space stations and other facilities running!

Compared to the open and undisguised form of slavery practiced in the frontier, the Kinner Tribe managed to do the same without incurring public outrage.

How can Kinnners be slaves if they willingly sold themselves to clients for eternity? They got paid! They retained their rights! They were never coerced!

None of this screamed slavery, so most people simply shrugged it off as a weird Kinner quirk.

The people that did take offense at the resemblance to slavery did not enjoy strong support. They were mostly idealists, and mostly came from the middle classes of their states.

The upper echelons never expressed a lot of objection to the Kinner Tribe's practices, because a significant portion of them happened to be their customers!

"The Kinner Tribe is quite ruthless." Ves quietly snorted. "By selling its own people, they keep their state secure and free from political opposition!"

The practice of bonding Kinnners to foreigners for substantial sums went on for so long that Ves began to doubt whether it was even necessary. Surely the

Kinners must have earned enough money to diversify their economy and develop new means of creating wealth, right?

Yet throughout all the centuries since the Kinner Tribe first turned to desperation, they never scaled back their Kinner trade. In fact, the opposite happened. Industrial birthing factories became more prevalent, and more and more vatters came into the galaxy only to be told throughout their entire youth that they were nothing but products in the making!

Was this what humanity was supposed to be like? Raising children en masse in conditions that were barely acceptable enough to stave off criticism, only to sell them to other humans in order to 'protect the tribe' and 'provide a future for the next generation' went way beyond a desperation strategy!

How much money were the Kinners at the top earning these days? How much did they spend on developing the tribe, and how much did they siphon the sums into their own pockets?

The worst thing about it was that the 'slaves' themselves fully supported the practice, as evidenced by Nitaa and Crindon's attitudes!

"Your sympathy is appreciated, but unneeded." Crindon said back at their hotel suite. "We can tell you have misgivings about 'buying' us, but we are very pleased to work with you, Mr. Larkinson."

Nitaa nodded in agreement. She didn't even bother to suppress the glee on her face. "That goes double for me! Working for a.. mech designer.. as exceptional as you is my greatest honor! I earnestly believe that you will go far!"

Both of them expressed their devotion towards Ves in different ways. While Nitaa was almost fanatical in her service to him, Crindon maintained a calmer and more professional demeanor.

At least Ves could pretend that Crindon was just a normal employee.

Now that they were by themselves, Ves could finally have a moment alone with Nitaa.

"Mr. Crindon, please work with Benny to see if the Barracuda, my personal ship, requires any upgrades."

"Who is Benny?"

"It's me." Gavin sighed. "Let's go in the other room and let Ves have his fun with his new 'bodyguard'."

"Oh!"

Gavin and Crindon snuck away, leaving Ves and Lucky alone with Nitaa.

"Lucky, activate your ECM field. Also, make sure no one is snooping in on us, including the two who have just left."

"Meow."

An ECM field came alone, giving them some measure of security. Ves had also dimmed the windows of the room, turning them completely dark.

Yet Ves did not feel completely assured. Considering that he was in the company of someone related to the Compact, he felt a bit more willing to reveal some of his tricks.

His bodyguard would likely be accompanying him for a long time, after all. Though Ves did not dare to guess whether Nitaa would still be around after a century, he needed to at least show some trust in order to maintain a good working relationship.

Her adoration towards the so-called Holy Son might fade one day when she realized how weak he truly was. By then, Ves hoped he appealed to her in a different way.

With a single mental command, his System comm materialized on his wrist. It rested above his new premium comm that Crindon assured was one of the most secure models on the market.

Mainly because it was fairly basic and limited. It offered as little vulnerabilities as possible while still offering the basic functionality that everyone expected from their comms.

Only when Ves activated his Privacy Shield did Ves feel assured. Perhaps it was a little overblown on his part since Lucky hadn't detected anything amiss, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

"Alright, it's safe to talk now." Ves began. "Tell me what you know about the Five Scrolls Compact. First, do you know where they are based in the star sector?"

His new bodyguard grimaced. "I can't tell you much. The Order of Fl'xix barely knows anything to begin with. A failed trainee like I know even less. Still, I did hear rumors. We trainees talk a lot to each other. I'm not sure whether they are true."

"Just tell me. I'll keep your words in mind."

"The Five Scrolls Compact maintains a very small presence in this region. It can never match up against the local CFA and MTA garrisons in a head-to-head fight, so they are holing themselves in the only region of space that even the Big Two are reluctant to enter."

"The Nyxian Gap."

"Exactly. While it's already difficult for the warships of the CFA to penetrate the Gap, the Compact makes it even harder by employing various spatial warp machines or something that destabilizes the surrounding space. Not a single ship that enters this region can maintain integrity."

It made sense. The Komodo Star Sector and its surroundings did not offer a lot of hiding spots that could block the Big Two's pursuit. Only in dangerous, anomalous regions of space did the notorious cultists have a realistic chance of staying a step ahead.

He nonetheless grew concerned. If the Five Scrolls Compact maintained a hideout in the depths of the Nyxian Gap, how did his father fare?

His choice of hiding out in the Nyxian Gap was an extremely daring choice! While hiding in the close proximity of the Compact was extremely risky, the same conditions that made it hard for the Big Two to hunt them down also applied to his father!

"Keep your friends close. Keep your enemies closer."

"Pardon?"

"Nothing." Ves waved his hand. "How sure are you about this rumor?"

She shrugged. "I can't say. Some of the older trainees are closely in touch with the senior members of the order."

"Are there any other places in the star sector where the Compact has a presence?"

Nitaa thought long and hard and managed to dredge up a couple of scraps from her mind.

"The Compact is very reluctant to maintain a permanent presence in civilized space. From what I hear, they prefer to rotate a small number of their brothers and sisters from their bolthole in the Nyxian Gap."

This meant that a number of Compact cultists were definitely roaming around the star sector, likely in disguise or in very deep hiding.

"How many?"

"Maybe ten?" She guessed. "Not that many, but each of them are extremely formidable. They're mostly scientists who extensively modified their bodies."

That did not sound like much to Ves. The chances of stumbling upon a cultist member among the trillions of people that lived in the star sector was extremely improbable!

Just as Ves started to relax, Nitaa dropped a bombshell.

"However, I did hear some news about a dignitary from the galactic center making a personal visit to the Nyx branch of the Compact! He's been on his way here for decades, and word is that he's about a decade away from arriving in our star cluster! Word is the dignitary is a representative of the Ruined Temple, which is the core of the entire Compact!"

"What?!"

Ves immediately became concerned! For what reason would someone from the central headquarters of the Compact travel all the way to the periphery of the galaxy?

Seeing that Ves did not realize the significance of this news, Nitaa offered some clarification.

"They say that every dignitary who is stationed directly at the Ruined Temple is a direct subordinate of the Holy Sons and Daughters of the Compact!"

!!!

If Ves already became distressed, now he erupted into full-blown panic!

There was only one reason for the Compact to dispatch such a major figure to this star sector!

### **Chapter 1323 Getting Answers**

Several years after receiving the System, Ves often thought of his parents. Both his father and mother turned out to be more than met the eye.

Ves sometimes wondered if he ever truly knew his mother. His memories of her before her death and after she reappeared as a ghost were as different as night and day!

The more he thought about it, the harder it was for him to deny that the gentle and completely normal mother who raised him was a facade.

His real mother turned out to be a whole other beast, a wolf in sheep's clothing who attempted to raise Ves as another sheep.

If Ves did not come into contact with the System, then he likely would have never learned the truth.

Yet this course of events did not come to pass. As soon as Ves obtained the System from his father, his entire life took a radically different turn.

His mother didn't want him to become a wolf. He became one regardless as various events stripped him of his sheepskin and unearthed his true nature.

While his transformation brought him great benefits, it also exposed him to a very huge vulnerability. Ever since he first heard about the Five Scrolls Compact from Doctor Jutland, his fear towards the origin of the System kept growing.

To hear that a dignitary from the most central portion of the Compact was on their way to the Komodo Star Sector alarmed him to no end!

Why would someone so important travel all the way out to the most remote and underdeveloped star sectors in human space?

He bet it definitely involved the Metal Scroll!

Over the years, Ves figured out that the Five Scrolls Compact might not know as much as he feared. Otherwise, his father wouldn't have fled civilized space while simultaneously dumping the System on his lap.

Yet even if the Compact was in the dark about Ves, the experiments their researchers conducted meant that they probably suspected that something iffy was going on in this region of space. Something important enough for the so-called Ruined Temple to take note.

"What is the Ruined Temple?" He asked.

"It's the ancestral temple of the Compact." Nitaa explained. "We were always taught to revere the temple and the dignitaries that are fortunate to be selected by the Holy Sons and Daughters to serve them in person. Each dignitary from the Ruined Temple holds absolute sway over the brothers and sisters stationed throughout the galaxy."

"Why is it called that way? Do you know that?"

"It's due to the Great Betrayal! Rebels turned against the Compact and launched a surprise attack against the Great Temple! The blow they struck was so awful that they subsequently formed the CFA and MTA, suppressing Compact influences throughout the galaxy and proclaiming that a new age has come!"

The Age of Conquest was very much a period of time where the Five Scrolls Compact held great sway. The Age of Mechs that followed afterwards shaped up to be an age defined by the Big Two that succeeded the secretive cult.

Unfortunately, Nitaa could tell Ves little more than that. Unlike Virtual Rear Admiral Ordoth, who had been created by a very high-ranking informer or spy of the Compact, his bodyguard had not even entered the bottom floor of the cult.

The stories imparted to her therefore consisted of basic, targeted information meant to instill awe and devotion to the Compact. If they ever defected or got caught by the authorities, the Compact wouldn't be worried because someone like Nitaa knew nothing of value.



Perhaps most pertinent to Ves was that Nitaa knew nothing about the disposition of the Sacred Scrolls.

She didn't know that the Compact only retained possession of the Water Scroll and the Earth Scroll.

She didn't know that the CFA and MTA snatched the Fire Scroll from the Great Temple.

She didn't know the Wood Scroll went missing during the chaos of the Great Betrayal.

She didn't know that the Metal Scroll was in fact only a short distance away!

While she knew that Ves had to be in possession of a Sacred Scroll, she did not know which of the five he possessed.

"If I may ask, sir.. which Scroll.."

"It's the Metal Scroll."

"Ah! I see! That's why you're a mech designer!"

Well, that wasn't quite right, but Ves did not quibble over the details. Instead, he focused on getting answers.

"Do you know who this dignitary is and how powerful they are? Can you tell me anything about the forces at their disposal?"

Nitaa shook her head in regret. "I have no idea, sir. The Fl'ixians are highly excited, though. They believe that the procession that is heading towards us will bring a lot of beneficial tech and enhancements. Everyone related to the Compact is hoping that the dignitary's arrival in the star sector will massively improve their strength and capabilities, thereby altering the balance of power in the entire star cluster."

This sounded incredibly worrisome to Ves. The dignitary would likely stay in the region for a while considering that he took decades to travel here. Ves would never be able to stay safe in the Komodo Star Sector once this huge figure settled in the Nyxian Gap!

"Can you tell me anything about the timeframe of this great person's arrival?"

"No. I've heard estimates ranging from a decade to three decades from now. The distance from the Ruined Temple to our star sector is immense. I don't even know what FTL method is being used to carry the dignitary to our region of space."

This left a very huge cloud of uncertainty over Ves. Ever since Nitaa revealed that a prominent figure of the Compact was on their way, he already began fermenting plans for a long-term vacation to a different star cluster.

The best way to avoid detection was to be well away from the areas being searched! The dignitary wouldn't be able to track down the System if it wasn't there in the first place!

The only problem was that such a move came with severe repercussions. Not only would he have to separate himself from most of his friends and acquaintances, the LMC's momentum would also stall without his direct presence.

Nonetheless, those drawbacks paled before the threat of the Five Scrolls Compact! None of his ambitions in the Komodo Star Sector held any meaning if he landed in the hands of their insane researchers and cultists!

All of this required careful thought. Planning such a major move not only demanded careful planning, but also a reasonable excuse to avoid arousing any suspicion.

Considering that the dignitary's arrival was at least a decade away, Ves had plenty of time to consider his future options carefully.

"Alright. Thank you for this warning, Nitaa. You've been very helpful to me by forewarning me. I really don't want to land in the hands of the Compact."

"It is my honor to serve you, Your Holiness."

"I told you not to call me that. It's a Compact custom, and neither of us are aligned with them. Just call me by something normal."

A troubled expression appeared on her face. "I.. It's hard for me to do so, Mr. Larkinson. You are the most eminent individual in the star sector! Not even the councilors of the MTA at Centerpoint can match your august height! You carry one of the five greatest artifacts that helped propel humanity to the dominant race in the galaxy!"

Ves crossed his arms and sighed. "I'm not as impressive as you think I am. The Metal Scroll I carry is.. not quite right. It's weaker than you think. Possessing it doesn't mean I'm capable of withstanding orbital bombardment or stopping a mech from stomping me flat with its foot. While the Scroll does provide me with some advantages, it takes time for me to match your expectations."

This dose of reality disappointed Nitaa immensely. "I see..."

"I am all by myself. I don't have anyone other than Lucky and my parents who are in on these secrets. I haven't built up an organization around me that can help me fight back against the Compact. I am constantly hiding in plain sight."

He took a risk by revealing his weak state. His bodyguard would be spending lots of time with him, so she would find out sooner or later that being a Holy Son did not mean he held the power of life and death over everyone in the star sector.

Even though Ves plainly exposed himself, secretly he had been on guard. He observed her with his spiritual vision. He could summon the Amastendira

within moments, and Lucky also diverted some attention to the tall woman in case she made any threatening moves.

Fortunately for everyone involved, Nitaa displayed no hint of malice.

"I believe that you will one day be able to wield great power of humanity, Your Holiness. This is the destiny of all of those who the Sacred Scrolls found worthy to bear them! The entire galaxy will one day learn of your greatness!"

To be honest, Ves did not know whether Nitaa spoke the truth or just recited some lie made up by the Compact. They certainly did everything possible to elevate the stature of their Holy Sons and Daughters.

He easily came around to the idea that the Scrolls weren't inert and could in fact think for themselves. Yet did they really select their own bearers? What were their criteria, and did they all have to be aligned to the Compact's crazy beliefs?

So far, the System did not compel him to worship the so-called immortal gods, but Ves had a feeling his version of the Metal Scroll was brain-damaged. Recovering from its presumed destruction during the Great Betrayal must have been immensely difficult for it to repair.

Perhaps it even lost a significant chunk of its memories and directives!

He questioned Nitaa some more about the Compact, but other than some meaningless rituals and unsubstantiated rumors, she did not have that much to say.

"I am not even that well-versed in the Order of Fl'xix." She said with regret. "While it is intricately tied to the Compact, we understood very early that we are primarily serving as their arm in this region of space."

The implication was that more organizations like the Order of Fl'xix existed in other states. Ves wouldn't know which one was in cahoots with the Compact

as they were very good at hiding themselves. Having Nitaa by his side might help in identifying them, but mostly the different groupings of the Compact weren't even aware of each other's identities.

This was the annoying part about opposing a threat in the dark. The Compact adopted a tried-and-true clandestine cell system which involved setting numerous autonomous cells.

The disadvantages of such a structure were aplenty. The cells often performed redundant tasks. They couldn't pool their resources together to pursue large-scale efforts. In some cases, they might even fight against each other without knowing that they were on the same side!

Yet for all of these weaknesses, the Compact valued the secrecy it brought. The destruction or defection of a single cell would never be able to threaten the security of the Ruined Temple and the true cadre of the organization.

In essence, while the Five Scrolls Compact wouldn't be able to wrest control of the galaxy from the Big Two anytime soon, exterminating them was impossible!

Neither the CFA and the MTA managed to wipe them out, so it was a complete fantasy if Ves thought he could defeat the powerful cult by his own efforts!

The best he could do was figure out a way to dismantle their regional cell in the Nyxian Gap. While he already resolved to leave the star cluster before the dignitary of the Ruined Temple arrived, it wasn't in his nature to flee without taking a parting shot at his bogeymen!

Plans already began to form in his mind. His next two steps in his tour would bring him to the Sentinel Kingdom, which practically bordered the Nyxian Gap. Perhaps he might be able to inquire more about the Compact in that state.

## Chapter 1324 Backdoors Everywhere

Once Ves obtained all the relevant information Nitaa possessed about the Compact, he lost interest in inquiring any further about her situation.

The few crucial pieces of information he obtained already loomed heavily on his mind. He cared little about the plots of the Order of Fl'xix or what the rejected trainees of the order were doing when they sold themselves to foreigners.

He turned his eyes back to Nitaa. Though he still held some reservations about trusting her, he was okay with bringing her onboard as a bodyguard.

"Alright, Nitaa. That's enough for one day. Please bring Mr. Crindon to me. I need to have a talk with him as well."

While she exited the room to carry out her errand, Ves deactivated his Privacy Shield and returned his System comm back into his Inventory. Compared to his sensitive talk with Nitaa, he did not plan on raising any sensitive topics with his new virtual security specialist.

"Meow."

"Yeah, Nitaa is a lot more willing to work for me than Crindon. I have the feeling that he would have been fine with working for any other wealthy patron."

Once the skinny man entered the room and closed the door, he directed an interesting stare towards Lucky.

The cat was still radiating its ECM field.

"That is a very interesting functionality, sir." He said with mild awe. "I have never seen a mechanical cat employ an interference field of this caliber. Even my new comm is rendered impotent in this field!"

Ves smirked. "It's CFA tech."

"Impressive! With such a function at your disposal, I have a lot more confidence in fulfilling my responsibilities! Can I ask whether your cat contains other CFA functions? An ECM field rarely comes by itself."

"I think Lucky has access to a lot of useful software and hardware. I'll tell him to cooperate with you so that you can take advantage of what he has to offer."

"Meow!"

Lucky objected to that? What was he, a cat-shaped comm? He was more than just a tool!

Of course, Ves would have none of it. "Just do it. This wouldn't have happened if you hadn't assimilated my CFA equipment. It's your own fault we have to make use of you to access those functions!"

"Meow meow!"

"Would you rather let us be hunted down by our enemies?"

"Meow.."

"Thought so."

Ves turned back to his new permanent employee. "So, Mr. Crindon. What do you think about my security arrangements?"

"I am still trying to get up to speed with all of your security arrangements. After communicating with the crew of your starship, I can already tell you though that she is reasonably secure against hacking. There's only one issue, though."

"The Leemar Institute of Technology probably built a backdoor into her systems, right?"

Crindon nodded. "They would be crazy to let this opportunity go by. From what I heard, you received her as a prize for winning a contest. It makes

sense if this institute would want to keep an eye on you. While your ship's security suite has always been kept up to date, it will never pose a hindrance to its own developers."

His words rang true. Even without proof, Ves could very well believe the Barracuda was riddled with bugs that relayed everything they observed back to the Friday Coalition.

He never cared too much about it until recently. Before he made his last and final visit to Leemar, he always considered himself to be in the Friday Coalition's camp. His distant but very real connection to Master Olson deterred the Coalition from making any overt moves against him while he was her apprentice.

Yet Ves no longer enjoyed the protection of the umbrella of this status! He'd been kicked out of Master Olson's sphere of influence, thereby depriving him of a shield to fend off Coalition probes!

Now that it appeared that he was beginning to side with the Hexers, the Coalition would definitely monitor his starship carefully. Who knew what they would do with all of the data they gathered!

"Is there a way to stop the Coalition from snooping in our ship?"

"I advise replacing your ship with another. The most secure ones tend to be ships imported from other star sectors or ships that are made and sold in Centerpoint. The latter are extremely expensive, though."

None of those options appealed to Ves.

He estimated that buying an imported ship would definitely entail a downgrade in most parameters. The money earned from selling the Barracuda wouldn't be enough to buy a ship with the same level of performance.



Buying a ship constructed by one of the ship-building enterprises related to the MTA would be even more expensive. Because they weren't built by a state, they only possessed one backdoor for the MTA instead of backdoors for both the MTA and the state in question.

This was extremely valuable, as the MTA were mostly hands-off and rarely meddled in the affairs of the local states it supervised!

Perhaps the only way for Ves to get completely rid of every possible backdoor was if he built a starship by himself from the ground up. That was way too far-fetched to him as designing and constructing a fully-functional starship from the ground up was a huge endeavor! Their sheer size and functions meant they were incomparably more complex to build!

All of these options were either too expensive or too unrealistic for Ves to contemplate.

"Is there really no other way to get rid of the Barracuda's vulnerability to eavesdropping by the Coalition?"

"Hmm..." Crindon thought deeply. "With your mechanical pet's help, I think it may be possible for me to rid your ship of most software backdoors. That still doesn't address the hardware vulnerabilities, but there may be an answer for that as well. We'll simply have to replace the gate."

The theory of his suggestion was simple. No matter what kind of backdoors had been baked into the components of his ship, they wouldn't be able to transmit their data to the Coalition without piggybacking on the communication channels of the ship!

As long as they beefed up the security of the gates leading into and out of the castle, they could ensure that no data would be transmitted to any third parties aside from the Big Two!

"It will require a weeks-long overhaul to tear out all of the transceivers built all over the hull of the ship and replace them with more secure ones." The Kinner bondsman determined. "The most delicate operation entails modifying the quantum entanglement node. It is crucial to replace the systems that translate and convert the data transmissions it receives before passing them on to its core components for transmission to another node that is many light-years away."

The entire story was a bit technical, but Ves possessed enough understanding in signals and communications technology to understand what his staff member tried to convey.

It was beyond Ves to replicate the core portions of the quantum entanglement node that enabled instantaneous communication throughout the galaxy.

Yet the systems surrounding the portion responsible for sending out messages weren't as difficult to decipher.

These systems sorted the data and stuffed them into packages before sending them out. Replacing them with imitations made by a different organization would ensure the Coalition no longer had access to the sensitive data surreptitiously snuck into the packages.

The only problem with that solution was that the replacement systems would henceforth carry the backdoors of their manufacturers instead! The entire operation amounted to replacing one voyeur with another!

Both of them recognized this thorny problem. Crindon shook his head. "The only way to address this problem is to make the quantum entanglement node systems yourself. Since you are a mech designer, it might be possible for you to do so, but it requires a lot of specialist knowledge in order to design it from scratch."

This wasn't a realistic solution either. Ves estimated that it would take months of focused study to accomplish something like that, and he didn't have the time to spare on an endeavor that was much more relevant to ship design than mech design.

"How about sourcing the replacement parts from the Hexadric Hegemony?" He eventually suggested. "Right now, my relationship with the Coalition has deteriorated. While I can't say for sure whether my ties to the Hegemony are getting warmer, I trust them more than the Coalition at this point."

"If you fear the Hegemony less than the Coalition, then it's a viable solution, sir. I still suggest you find a way to replace the vulnerable systems with more secure ones down the line, but as a stopgap solution I can work with your suggestion. We just have to find the right time and place to put your ship into drydock."

"Can we do it here?"

"We can, but I don't advise you to. The Kinner shipyards and drydocks aren't famed for their quality and capabilities. We'll also have to order and possibly arrange for the shipment of the replacement parts from the Hegemony in advance."

The two began to hash out a plan regarding the overhaul. After Ves revealed his itinerary to Crindon, the Kinner advised him to book a drydock at the Sentinel Kingdom.

"It's one of the largest third-rate states in the star sector and it is vastly more secure than the Chuko Republic where you are traveling next. Its industrial infrastructure is excellent so the modifications can be achieved as quickly as possible without much risk."

"Alright. Speak with Gavin and tell him to put this plan on the agenda. Please work with him to prepare all the arrangements. If you encounter any

hindrances with regards to access, for example procuring the Hegemony-built replacement parts, just get back to me so I can throw my weight around."

"Understood, sir." Crindon nodded. "Addressing the vulnerabilities of your gear and the ship will go a long way in preventing third parties from obtaining damaging data."

"Alright. Go ahead and take Lucky and see what you can do with him. I'm sure he's been hiding a lot of goodies from me. Make sure you get everything out of him that can help us beef our security even further!"

Though it took some pushing from Ves, Lucky grumpily allowed Crindon to pick him up and move him to a different room so that he could perform his duties without disturbing anyone.

Ves wasn't worried that Crindon might possibly tamper with Lucky. He instead would be a lot more concerned about his bondsman's life. He paid the equivalent of 180 million bright credits to secure his services, after all! He still wanted to get his money's worth out of his perpetual employee!

Now that he had a moment to himself, Ves loosened his shoulders and sank into a couch.

"What a day."

Encountering Nitaa and hearing her explosive revelations seriously upended his long-term plans.

He always figured he could keep his head down and quietly progress his mech design abilities in peace. Yet the Five Scrolls Compact was not content in leaving their questions unanswered.

For a dignitary to depart from the galactic center decades ago and still be on the way to the Komodo Star Sector strongly hinted that the envoys of the Ruined Temple would be here to stay.

This threw a huge wrench into his plans! It might even be severe enough to compel him into moving to another star cluster for a time!

"Holing up in Vicious Mountain or Majestic Teal won't be enough. It's too close to the Nyxian Gap."

He needed to move further ahead. While he didn't have to run all the way to the other end of the galactic rim or all the way to the galactic heartland, he at least needed to cross over into another star cluster.

"Yet how can I leave behind my ventures in the Komodo Star Sector?" He questioned.

Could he afford to leave behind the LMC and the Larkinson Family? Comm calls and remote interactions helped a lot in keeping him in touch, but it was no replacement to being physically present.

"I'll have to think about it carefully." He sighed.

#### **Chapter 1325 Reason to Leave**

After several hours of contemplation, Ves developed a tentative series of steps he should take in order to mitigate the damage and make his move plausible.

First, he needed to have a reason to move to a different star cluster. No normal mech designer would leave behind his company, his connections and his other endeavors in order to start anew in a completely different region of space!

He would have to come up with a good excuse for him to do so, and for now the only one he came up with was to expand the reach of the LMC.

It sounded premature. Expanding a company's reach to a neighbor star clusters made sense to someone like Master Olson.

It did not make sense for a lowly Journeyman. The general rule was that Journeymen ought to focus on growing their presence in their home markets. If they specialized in niche mechs, then expanding to the rest of the star sector was an acceptable strategy to pursue.

For various reasons, it was incredibly difficult for Journeymen to export their mechs across star sectors. Even founding branches of their companies in another star sector in order to produce mechs abroad was rife with complications.

"It's already problematic for me to do business in another star sector. Moving to another star cluster is even harder!"

There was only one way he could succeed. He needed to gain access to the Rim Guardian's extensive logistics network and secure their guarantees.

To do that, he needed to obtain their favor, which meant completing the thorny assignment they dumped on his lap.

"Goddammit.. I'll have to pull out all the stops in order to turn William Urbesh into an expert candidate!"

If Ves failed this mission, he would face a significant amount of delay in earning the MTA fraternity's favor. By the time he received another opportunity to prove his value to them, the Ruined Temple envoys might have reached their destination by then!

While other organizations existed that rivaled the Rim Guardians in this capacity, Ves did not have a convenient introduction on hand to get his foot in their doors.

The Rim Guardians are my only choice." He muttered.

Once he secured their favor, he could redeem his contributions for their backing in his business venture. Only when he obtained this assistance would he have a viable reason to divert to another star cluster.

Yet.. what would this imply for his mechs?

The main reason why Journeymen mostly stuck to their star sectors was because the abstruse effects of their mechs no longer worked when they moved too far away from their designers.

For example, if some rich kid from the Terran Confederation took a liking for his Blackbeak for some reason, he could order someone to import a gold label of the mech.

After decades in transit, the mech that the Terran received would look completely dull and unremarkable compared to when it was in its prime! This was because the distance between the mech and Ves was simply too far!

According to what Delta-Gina imparted to him back then, the reach of a Journeyman only encompassed a couple of star sectors at most.

"That's basically the equivalent of a star cluster."

Moving to another star cluster would help distance himself from the Ruined Temple envoys when they arrived at the Nyxian Gap.

Yet the same move would also distance himself to the vast majority of mechs designed by him and produced by the LMC and other manufacturers.

The increased distance would definitely rob all of those mechs with the special qualities that his customers valued. Those qualities were the only reasons for mech buyers to purchase his products!

"However, does this rule even apply to me at all?"

The assumption that hampered the expansionist hopes of many mech designers may not apply to his own designs.

That was because Ves imparted his designs with their own spiritual sources!

The design spirits he bestowed to his mech designs may be sufficient to empower the mechs, even without his design seed's assistance!

His eyes lit up. If his guess was true, then his designs might be able to sustain their psionically-empowered effects even if Ves departed from the galactic rim!

He came up with another hypothesis as well. He guessed the reach of his designs might actually be related to the strength of his design spirits!

A relatively weak design spirit like that of the aging Blackbeak likely depended more on Ves than the pale images he instilled in his design.

It was only when he designed the Crystal Lord did Ves begin to make use of external sources of spirituality to empower his images.

The strength of the spiritual fragments that Ves made use of varied significantly. The Aurora Titan's design spirit incorporated Qilanxo's spiritual fragment, which was the strongest spiritual entity that Ves had ever encountered!

"It's very possible for the Aurora Titan to work throughout the entire galactic rim!" Ves shockingly realized.

His other designs were not as fortunate, particularly the Blackbeak and the Crystal Lord.

"Fortunately, I'm already planning to phase them out." He murmured. "By the time I revise these two designs, I'll probably revisit this aspect."

The Mark II editions of his Blackbeak and Crystal Lord designs would fully reflect the lessons he learned since he designed their predecessors.

Ves had no obligation to keep the design spirits of his older designs! In fact, if he wanted to, he could probably replace or upgrade the design spirit of the current Mark I incarnations on the spot!



He shook his head. "There's no reason for me to do so."

Not only would such revisions disrupt the piloting experiences for the people using his Blackbeaks and Crystal Lords, but it was also pointless to invest in aging designs.

Rather than go through all that effort into propping up a pair of old designs, Ves would rather save his powder for the Mark II editions where he could introduce a host of new improvements.

"Both of them will fully reflect my strength as a Journeyman."

Getting back to the question of the reach of his designs, Ves believed he possessed a unique advantage in this area.

"If I'm right, I'll face one less obstacle in setting up shop in another star cluster!"

He still needed to test this effect. He raised his arm in order to activate his newly-purchased secure comm. He composed a brief message and sent it to Calsie.

It was extremely expensive for a mech company to transport a mech across multiple star sectors. All the cargo capacity of shipping vessels built for trans-sector travel were already reserved by wealthy insiders.

Outsiders such as Ves and the LMC needed to pay a sky high price to transport an entire mech over such a huge distance. Not only that, but it might take years for the Aurora Titan Ves wanted to send out to reach its destination.

"Fortunately, I can afford to wait."

Assuming that the experiment would confirm his guess that his designs were able to sustain their spiritual qualities by themselves, Ves would be partially unbound by geographic restrictions.

"Perhaps it doesn't matter as much where I design my mechs."

He could conceivably design mechs for both his home star cluster and the star cluster he visited and have them at full strength in both regions.

This was the unique advantage of his spiritual techniques!

Once everyone else learned about this potential property, they would probably look at him in a new light!

It would also attract some unwelcome scrutiny from the MTA, so Ves did not plan to publicise this possibility until he could no longer hide it. He did not wish to invite their scrutiny after he successfully deflected their attention on his eccentric design philosophy.

"This little feature will probably be regarded as another quirk of my weird Class IX design philosophy."

Class IX design philosophies acquired a reputation of breaking the rules and achieving unconventional effects. Perhaps he wasn't the first mech designer to violate the range rule to an extent.

As long as his new assumptions worked out, Ves not only faced less obstacles in moving to another star cluster, but he might even have a very compelling reason to do so!

"If I have the power to expand the reach of my designs, then I'd be stupid to ignore it! I have to take advantage of this property!"

With such a great reason for him to flex his design abilities in another region of space, the Five Scrolls Compact wouldn't suspect he was actually trying to evade their encirclement!

While he was essentially trading attention from the Compact for attention from the MTA, he vastly preferred the latter over the former.

Attracting the Compact's attention meant death.

Attracting the attention of the MTA meant Ves would simply have to pretend to be a nut in order to explain away his irregularities.

"Maybe Gloriana can help me in this area."

An interesting possibility came into mind when Ves thought about collaboration. Perhaps the same range-breaking effect might also apply to the design philosophies of other mech designers who contributed to his designs!

This would give him an excuse to take Gloriana along with him. Though her existing designs might lose their strength, she developed so few of them that she could easily offer compensation to her customers.

"She only designs custom mechs, after all. Replacing twenty mechs is a lot easier than replacing twenty-thousand mechs!"

Ves felt very apprehensive at the thought of roping in Gloriana for his journey. Yet it might be the only way he would have permission to leave the Komodo Star Sector. Knowing how highly she valued their relationship, she would never allow him to depart the star sector on his own!

The only reason why Ves did not object to bringing along his 'girlfriend' was because he could use her craziness to camouflage his own suspicious points!

"Ves and Gloriana, the two crazy mech designers enjoying their decade-long holiday in another star sector."

Yup, it sounded completely crazy. Hopefully, everyone else would stop thinking deeper about the reason why he really wanted to flee his home star cluster.

The only challenge was that he would have to raise the suggestion to Gloriana. Ves had no idea how she would react and what kind of conditions she might raise to agree to the suggestion. She would have to abandon many

of her ventures in the Komodo Star Sector in order to accompany him on his trip.

He also assumed that the two of them would still be an item at that time. Anything could happen in a decade. Perhaps Gloriana moved on to obsessing over another mech designer in a couple of years.

"...Yeah. No chance of that happening!"

Their compatibility was simply too high! Though Ves still harbored a lot of resentment against Callisto Professional Relations, their matchmaking was still largely on point despite the faulty data they worked with. The odds of Gloriana finding a more compatible mech designer was quite low!

Even if they separated for some reason, Ves could just make do on his own. He would just have to find some other way to come across as crazy or eccentric in order to deflect unwelcome attention.

"Alright, that's the plan!" Ves clapped his hands.

He needed to make a lot of preparations before he was ready to move to another star cluster. Depending on how long the Ruined Temple envoys stayed in the Nyxian Gap, Ves might have to stay away for half a century or more.

The only way he could return sooner was if the MTA and CFA managed to uproot the Compact presence in the Nyxian Gap!

"I'll have to help the Big Two make that happen somehow! Who knows how long those pests will squat in my home star sector!"

Despite his misgivings about this plan, a part of him felt excited as well. Journeymen were meant to travel. Stepping outside his star cluster and entering into a completely different one would expose him to vast differences in mech cultures.

His Mastery experiences already gave him a lot of glimpses on how mechs were used differently in other regions of space. Choosing the right star cluster would allow him to get into touch with completely new paradigms, such as immersing himself in a star sector that predominantly adopted bestial mechs!

### **Chapter 1326 Try Before You Buy**

The next day, Ves experienced a completely new day. The addition of Nitaa and Crindon to his staff made him feel a lot more at ease because he was finally able to offload some of his concerns to his new bondsmen.

With the imposing form of Nitaa following behind his back, people started to divert to the sides in order to avoid bumping into him. Aside from her deterrent effect, she also possessed a sharp judgement as she frequently managed to spot the more dangerous men and women in the vicinity.

As for Crindon, Ves did not bring him along during his forays in Bloodstone. As a spy and a security expert, it was much more appropriate to deploy him in the background than in the foreground.

Currently, Ves ordered the Kinner bondsman to take a shuttle ride to orbit and board the Barracuda. From there, he could begin to sweep his ship for bugs and determine which portions were suspect.

In the meantime, Ves spent a few days touring Bloodstone and stopping by the job markets to see if he could pick up another bargain like Nitaa. Kelandra guided him through all the famous sites and job markets and introduced him to many possible hires.

No luck.

While the Kinner Tribe offered plenty of Kinner professionals of all vocations, Ves did not find anyone too exceptional.

It was extremely unlikely for most people to develop spiritual potential. Those that did mostly possessed unremarkable attributes. Drawing out their potential

took a lot of effort on his part, so he at least wanted to obtain something worthwhile out of all of that trouble.

Someone like Fe Nitaa possessed a remarkably different spiritual attribute than others. Ves suspected that it may have even been the essential prerequisite for her to make use of her empowered nose.

Best of all was that she could already sense unusual presences despite the immaturity of her spiritual potential. As long as Ves managed to find a way to develop other people's spiritual potential, Nitaa's mysterious smelling ability might become incredibly potent one day!

Thinking about exploiting unusual spiritual potential reminded him of the offer he extended to the Ingvar twins. The two fallen noble mech pilots should be facing a lot of trouble trying to keep themselves afloat.

The offer that Ves extended them should have been the first and most attractive one they received, but whether they accepted it or not was still in question.

Nobles tended to be very proud of themselves. Ordinarily, they always looked down on mercenaries. Mech pilots who tended to go mercenary usually weren't cut out for the military or more elite and prestigious outfits.

Some stuck-up people even considered mercenaries to be just a step above pirates!

To be fair, the lowest mercenaries often turned out to be little different from thugs with mech. Their lack of discipline, training, altruism, commitment and other desirable traits did not endear them to their peers.

Yet the mercenary community as a whole was very diverse.

At the upper end, the life of a mercenary was often romanticized in the dramas, and for good reason. A mech pilot brought on to a mercenary corps

with a good reputation received excellent pay and enjoyed a lot more freedom than a military mech pilot.

They traveled from star to star, experiencing new sights while participating in important missions that made the galaxy a better place.

All kinds of mercenaries and mercenary corps existed, and to Ves it seemed that Bloodstone encompassed almost every variety that existed.

The Kinner Tribe featured elite tribal corps like the Hundred-And-Seventeen Blades which could give the elites of the Bright Republic a run for their money.

They also featured more haphazard mercenary corps such as the Battle Criers which Ves recently extended an offer to as well. While they were not exactly his first choice, he valued their resourcefulness and scoundrel-like nature.

Compared to a more rigid mercenary corps like Commander Oryn Mair's Edge of Redemption, the Battle Criers could make do with less supplies, pay and preparation.

A more flexible outfit like the Battle Criers also wouldn't object as much if Ves ever ordered them to do something questionable.

Ves needed the right tool for the right job. Considering his current plans, the Battle Criers were much more suitable because they had already traveled widely.

That was not to say that a more disciplined and well-trained outfit like the Edge of Redemption lacked utility. It was just that they served best as a hammer to smash through solid obstacles.

Forcing them into other roles such as acting as his escorts was a significant waste.

In the future, he might require the services elite mech troop that could act as his hammer. If that time ever came, Ves much preferred to raise a troop from the ground up rather than buy one ready-made.

He wanted his strongest mech element to be trained in the use of his mechs from the start. They would become his most elite Avatars, the ones who were better than all the other mech pilots in his employ other than his expert pilots.

Setting something up like that would take years, perhaps even decades. Ves always imagined that he would have plenty of time to build up an elite mech company within the Avatars, but considering his new plans he might have to accelerate his timeframe.

"If only I can buy out the more skilled or elite Kinner outfits." He sighed.

Kelandra offered him a pat on the back. "You are still young. You should return to the Kinner Tribe when you've become a more established mech designer. Once you build up a lot of renown and grow your company to an impressive scale, the pickier Kinnners will be glad to knock on your doors."

That would take too long. The Five Scrolls Compact presence in the star cluster would experience a major transformation in the future.

The coming arrival of the Ruined Temple envoys meant that the Compact's local cells would definitely become extraordinarily active.

The dignitary from the Ruined Temple would likely initiate a search for the Metal Scroll in Ves' possession!

Under such threatening circumstances, Ves did not dare to venture to the Kinner Tribe knowing that their Order of Fl'ix was actually an arm of the Compact!

In fact, getting out of the star cluster and vacationing elsewhere sounded like a really good idea!



Faced with this distant but approaching threat, Ves no longer occupied himself with hiring additional Kinners. He merely passed the time while waiting for follow-ups from his outstanding offers.

While touring the various monuments and historical sites, Ves also managed to squeeze a moment to drop off a very special package.

Ves passed on a familiar-looking cube to a Shadow Courier who met him in an isolated alleyway. Kelandra and Gavin waited outside, leaving only Lucky and Nita by his side.

"Package received. We will ensure it will arrive in the hands of its intended recipient." The man hidden in his dark robes replied. "Please be assured that we will do everything possible to deliver it as fast as possible, but due to the distance involved the delivery might take three or four months."

"I'm aware of the difficulties."

"If you are transmitting data, I highly advise you to allow us to transmit it over our highly secure channels. Delivery can be completed in a matter of days instead of months."

Ves shook his head. "No thanks. This will do. Make sure that no one messes with the package, or else its contents will be lost."

"Have no fear, customer. We always ensure sound delivery, or your money back!"

"Yes, yes, just get on with it. By the way, tell the recipient not to bother me unless he sends me another package!"

"That will cost extra."

"Urgh!"

With that errand done, Ves resumed touring Bloodstone, though he soon lost interest in the sights. The ubiquitous bloodstone and the monotonous architecture made the cities look the same.

The Kinnners possessed a very practical mindset, but they blended it with ancient tribal customs. This combination essentially froze their culture in time. Many Kinnners embraced their shabbiness and felt very little desire to modernize their culture and living conditions.

This stood in complete contrast to the Kamon Republic he visited before. The Kamoners, flush with wealth and devoid of threats, pursued comfort and refinement, so much so that their strength and readiness had declined to disastrous levels.

The reluctance of the Kinnners to engage in hedonism and materialism elicited a lot of admiration from Ves. Yet the downside of that was that most Kinnners exhibited a lot of division.

A disproportionate amount of Kinnners counted among the lower classes of the tribe. Those who were a bit more well-off were few in number. Their numbers were kept down to the high amount of taxes and other contributions the state demanded of its people.

The observations he made in the past few days lessened his admiration of the Kinner Tribe. While he still ranked them higher than the Kamon Republic, it was anything but perfect.

"No state is perfect." Kelandra ruefully smiled. "Yet the Kinner Tribe is still my home."

It was because of this widespread sentiment that the Kinner Tribe remained so stagnant. None of them truly questioned whether their expansive Kinner trade went too far. Hardly any of the money the state earned from the trade was reflected back on Bloodstone. Where did the bulk of the money truly go?

No one knew.

"It's almost been a week." He remarked after they visited some museums.

"The offers I extended to the Battle Criers and the Ingvar twins will expire tomorrow."

That the mercenaries waited so long before answering was not a good sign. A hint of uncertainty lingered in his mind. Did he have to revisit Ornament Halls to hire a more readily-available mercenary corps?

While plenty of Kinner outfits expressed their willingness to work for him, they lacked the colorfulness and camaraderie of the Battle Criers.

Fortunately, Ves soon received one of the messages that he had been waiting for. His eyes lit up as he read the message.

"Commander Cinnabar is ready to sign a contract with me! Let's head back to Ornament Halls!"

His group interrupted their boring tour and immediately hopped into an aircar that took them to the familiar grounds.

After entering one of the halls, they filed into an office where Commander Cinnabar already waited for him with a contract lawyer and another official.

"So you made up your mind?" Ves hopefully asked.

"We had a long discussion about it. Some of my mech pilots weren't enthused about moving to the Bright Republic. It's too far away from the tribe." Cinnabar admitted.

"Will that be a problem?"

The commander smirked. "Nope. It took some convincing, but my Battle Criers all came around to the idea of settling down somewhere new. While we have a lot of friends in this region, we also pissed a lot of people off. It will

ultimately be better for us if we moved away and leave all that ugliness behind."

It sounded like the Battle Criers had done more than stir up some trouble. Regardless of what they did in the past, once Ves bought them out, their past deeds no longer mattered.

For now though, neither Ves and the Commander were ready to make that step. Instead, they signed a simple one-year contract that was subject to extension if both sides agreed to it. Ves would have the opportunity to buy out the Battle Criers if he was happy with their performance.

It took hours to go through the contract and all of the additional paperwork that came with hiring an armed mech force. An official from the Mercenary Association witnessed the agreement and approved of the terms.

"Alright! From now on, you work for me. I will be placing myself in the care of your mech pilots, commander."

"I'll do my best to keep my men in line." The burly mercenary commander grinned as he shook the hand of his new employer. "It will take some time for us to get used to escort duty, but I'll get it done."

With a Kinner mercenary corps in his pocket, Ves had met his primary goal for his visit to Bloodstone.

"Now, there's only the Ingvar twins left." He whispered.

#### **Chapter 1327 Imon and Casella**

The sun began to fade over the horizon. Ves began to lose hope that the Ingvar twins would accept his offer.

He found that to be a bit of a pity. While the two mech pilots of a higher caliber than the mech pilots of the Battle Criers, Ves really valued them for their unusual spiritual potential.

While their spirituality was as faint and undeveloped as the ones present in the minds of others with potential, their attribute was very peculiar. It was something that Ves had never encountered before.

"The two are like a splash of color in a sea of grey."

What their unusual spiritual attribute represented and what capabilities it brought to the Ingvars when they developed was a mystery to Ves. All he cared about was developing their potential to see what kind of surprises their mysterious attribute produced.

"Meow." Lucky padded his paw on his head.

"Yeah, you're right." He sighed. "There's no use pining over people who don't want to work for me. I'd have to be a Senior or something if I want to access the good stuff."

Despite advancing to Journeyman, Ves had not yet reached the apex of the local power structure. Most of the Kinner Tribe's premier products still remained out of reach until he proved he wasn't a flash in the pan who quickly fizzled out in a couple of years.

Just as Ves was ready to return to his hotel, his comm lit up, informing him that he received another message. He immediately activated the interface to read the message.

"Yes! They accepted!"

In the end, necessity trumped pride. The situation of the Ingvar twins might be better than other mercenaries since they piloted their own mechs, but it was a far cry from their old station back when House Ingvar still stood proud.

Once Ves took in the message, he diverted back to Ornament Halls, which was in the process of emptying out. Ves and his company squeezed past the mercenaries who were done for the day and met the Ingvars in another office.

Imon Ingvar went straight to the point. "Mr. Larkinson, we thought long and hard about your offer. After considering our options, we have decided to accept your offer."

Both Imon and Casella looked a bit more composed compared to last time. Back then, they were smarting from all of the setbacks and betrayals they suffered.

This time, they seemed resigned to their new circumstances. Ves could tell that they gave up any hope of recovering the former mechs and ship they lost at the hands of their mutinous subordinates.

"Are you sure you want to work for me?" He asked. "The contract requires that you will have to stick with me for at least a year. We'll be moving away from the Kinner Tribe during this time."

Casella Ingvar brushed aside her platinum hair from her face. "We are aware. We thought about staying in this region in order to hatch a plan to take revenge against those who betrayed our noble house, but... it's impossible for us to strike back at Black Poppy without a ship."

"Distancing ourselves from the Kingdom of the Three Flowers sounds like a better idea." Imon continued. "It's the only form of revenge we can realistically take. By staying alive, House Ingvar will still continue to exist."

Ves crossed his arms as he leaned back against the office chair. "I hope you don't harbor any unrealistic expectations that I will help you take revenge against Black Poppy. I'm a mech designer, not a revolutionary. The affairs that take place in Three Flowers don't concern me. My company may even sell its products to Black Poppy in the future. Are you willing to stomach that from me, or would you rather look elsewhere?"

He wanted to draw a very clear line from the start. Right now, Ves might hold some curiosity towards the Ingvar siblings, but that did not mean they entered

his inner circle. They weren't as loyal and reliable as the Kinners, so Ves needed to handle them with a lot more caution.

The Ingvars both appeared conflicted, yet Casella quickly regained her composure. It appeared that she was the calmer and more analytical sibling.

"We know what we are getting into." She said with a deliberately professional tone. "We do not wish to interfere with your business activities. We are only hired to pilot mechs and fight. Everything else is not our concern. We only hope that you will be mindful enough to spare us of any interactions with our enemies."

"I won't force you to play nice with Black Poppy or the Kingdom of the Three Flowers." Ves let out a reassuring smile. "While I won't specifically accommodate your desires, I can give you at least this much if you inform me of any potential objections beforehand."

That wasn't enough for Casella. "It would make us feel a lot better if this is added to the contract. We would like our employment contract to contain a clause that allows us to opt out on any orders, missions or instructions related to the Kingdom of the Three Flowers without incurring any penalty."

Ves lazily waved his hand. "Granted."

As the contract lawyer added the requested terms to the contract, Ves asked another question.

"Are you the only survivors of your house, or have other Ingvars managed to escape with their lives?"

Imon grimaced. "We do not know. There are a number of Ingvars stationed in other states at the time of the betrayal, but most of them died at the hands of assassins. While we are sure that some of our distant relatives have managed to slip the net, we do not have any way of organizing ourselves. All the channels of our house are definitely monitored by our enemies. Gathering in a

single place will only present a convenient target to the hunters assigned to clean up any trace of our noble house."

Ves expressed some interest in collecting a couple more Ingvars. He wanted to see whether some of the Ingvar survivors with spiritual potential possessed the same special attribute as Imon and Casella.

If that was the case, then this trait might be hereditary, which opened up a lot of possibilities!

He felt a little disappointed that he wouldn't be able to gather more Ingvars. He quickly pushed it aside when he realized that he started to regard the Ingvars in the same way as the Kinners.

Not every human was a product! Ves had to show a lot more mindfulness towards his subordinates.

As the contract continued to take shape, the Ingvars asked their own questions.

"Will you be fine with our old mechs or will you assign us with new ones?" Imon asked.

"It depends on how long you stay in my service." Ves answered. "If you decide to continue to stick with me, I'll transfer you to my Avatars of Myth, where you will be assigned to different mechs, mostly of my own design. What mechs do you specialize in, by the way?"

He hadn't looked that up yet, which was a major oversight on his part.

"We are both trained in spaceborn mech combat, though we are not novices when it comes to piloting landbound mechs."

Most mech pilots who specialized in spaceborn mechs knew how to pilot landbound mechs as well. Yet their lack of training in this area meant they



lacked many of the nuances and tactics employed by dedicated landbound mech pilots.

"Which mech types do you pilot?"

"I specialize in piloting spaceborn rifleman mechs." Casella answered. "In fact, I excel at long-range marksmanship, so laser weapons are my go-to loadouts. I also possess some command training. I was the commander of my former detachment."

"I prefer to duel my enemies up close. I pilot a spaceborn swordsman mech, though I can pilot other melee mechs if needed. As long as I'm not getting shot at by an entire mech company, I'm confident I can fell most mechs who block my way." Imon added.

That was a good mix, though Ves took their words with a grain of salt.

He might be able to employ Imon as a mech duelist or champion who could fight on his behalf. Yet the man did not possess the emotional fortitude to excel in this area.

Someone as determined and passionate about mech duels like Raella Larkinson wouldn't cry like a sorry little kid after suffering a small setback.

As for Casella, Ves put a lot of question marks on her command ability. Even if she did take classes, the fact that her household mech company mutinied meant that her actual performance in this area was very sketchy!

Her command ability was a far cry from that of Commander Cinnabar, who easily managed to maintain control over his band of ruffians!

Fortunately, Ves did not require the two to serve in those capacities. He was fine with letting them work as regular mech pilots. They might learn a thing or two about the mercenary life from the Battle Criers.

Time passed as the contract reached its final form. Neither side requested anymore additions, which meant that both of them signed the agreement in short order as witnessed by the Mercenary Association.

Unlike his previous hires, the Ingvars did not bow or kneel to him to swear a ritual oath. They weren't Kinnners whose oaths were taken a lot more seriously. This meant the Ingvars had now hired themselves on to Ves with remarkably little fanfare.

A moment of silence stretched as the contract lawyer and the other officials filed out of the office.

"It is.. strange." The female Ingvar said with a hollow voice. "Even if we have only agreed to work for you for a year, I feel as if I've signed my life away."

Imon embraced his sister in a hug. "It's all the Kinnners around us that give you that impression. We are different from their kind. Remember who we are and where we came from. House Ingvar may have fallen, but as long as we are alive, we can one day restore it to its former glory!"

While the two siblings had their private moment, Ves turned around to Kelandra. "Now that the Ingvars accepted my offer, my stay at Bloodstone has come to an end. I will soon depart for the Chuko Republic."

"Chuko isn't exactly the most pleasant destination, I've heard."

"That is what the Battle Criers and the Ingvar pair are for. While the news coming out of Chuko is fairly troubling, I'm confident my new escorts are more than capable of fending off any trouble we'll meet on the way. I don't plan to travel outside the most established trade routes anyway."

Once they completed all of the formalities, Ves instructed his latest two hires to pack up their bags and join the fleet of the Battle Criers in orbit of Bloodstone II-A.

"What about our mechs, sir?" Casella asked.

"Benny, please arrange shipment of their mechs."

"On it, boss."

His visit to Bloodstone came to an end. As Ves and his staff returned to the hotel, they only planned to stay for one more night before they departed from the planet.

A smile appeared on his face as he thought of all the new people he hired. Aside from the Ingvar siblings, his new subordinates consisted entirely of Kinners.

"I might have more scruples about hiring other mercenaries, but the Kinners are different."

"Meow."

Lucky climbed on top of his stomach as he lied down on a couch in his hotel room. The cat curled into a ball and squinted its eyes on contentment.

"Hehe, looking forward to our next destinations, are you?"

"Meow."

"Yeah, you're right. We're getting closer and closer to the Nyxian Gap. The Sentinel Kingdom is especially close to this dangerous region. I wonder if I'll be able to obtain more spicy Nyx dog ingredients. I'm becoming addicted to this food!"

"Meow!"

### Chapter 1328 Human Investment

The next day, Ves and his staff said farewell to Kelandra and took a shuttle ride to orbit. They reached a space station orbiting a moon and took another ride back to Barracuda.

"Welcome aboard, sir." Crindon greeted Ves at the entry hatch. "We've made some minor overhauls to some of the systems of your ship. Please mind your step as some of the sections are still being worked on by her crew and myself."

Ves noted that some of the deck panels had been removed in order to access the ship components underneath.

Having performed similar kind of work in the past during the war, he recognized that Crindon had been in the process of replacing one of the Barracuda's many internal communication nodes.

"Keep up the good work."

"Thank you, sir."

"How long will this go on?"

"Months." His new security expert admitted. "The crew and I are trying to accomplish as much as possible before we arrive at the drydock we've booked at the Sentinel Kingdom. In the meantime, much of the internal communication and monitoring system will be taken offline as we can't determine to what extent they've been compromised."

Ves frowned at that. "Will that impact the functioning of my ship?"

"Not as much as you think." The Kinner bondsman smiled. "Your comm is sufficient to keep you securely connected to the ship's virtual network. The signal transmissions may be a little weaker than you'd like, but you won't notice the difference during normal usage."

The overhaul would continue to take place during travel. Even if Crindon cut the wrong cable or something, it wasn't as if the Barracuda would crash out of FTL. Starships featured a lot more redundancy and could still maintain some functionality even if they lost a third of their hulls.

After inquiring a bit more about the nature of the ongoing overhaul, Ves left the matter in Crindon's hands. While he could assist his subordinates in replacing the suspect parts with new ones, it was a waste of time for him to engage in this kind of menial labor.

He was a mech designer! Even if he'd been distracted by his hiring decisions lately, that did not detract from the fact that he should be spending most of his time on his work!

"I really should start coming up with a vision for my upcoming design project." He muttered to himself.

After waving Crindon goodbye, he entered the bridge in order to check up with Captain Silvestra before retiring to his stateroom.

While Lucky jumped to his bed in order to take a nap, Gavin and Nitaa both stood before his desk.

Each of them had something to address. Ves looked at the two of them before gesturing towards his executive assistant.

"You first, Benny."

"Ahem. I was just checking in with Commander Cinnabar. His fleet is already prepared to depart. All supplies have been loaded and the two Ingvars are safely aboard the Ion Tracker, though squeezing in their mechs took a lot of effort. They had to be stowed in the cargo bay, which means that deploying them during a battle is exceedingly risky."

With the addition of the Battle Criers, the Barracuda no longer traveled by herself. She formed the center of a new formation of five additional vessels.

Two of them consisted of the light carriers of the Battle Criers.

The Ion Tracker was the flagship of the Battle Criers and hosted their spaceborn mech contingent. Commander Cinnabar also resided on the Ion

Tracker and could even take to the field with his personal striker mech if the situation became dire.

Their second light carrier was the Glaze Hopper, which hosted all of the landbound mechs of the Battle Criers. The Glaze Hopper was just as fast and agile as Ion Tracker but possessed the additional ability to land on planets as long as the gravity wasn't too high.

She was no combat carrier though. Just like every light carrier, their armor left a lot to be desired. Armor was by far the most expensive component of a ship, and most mercenaries couldn't afford to purchase anything but the vessels with the barest amount of protection.

Aside from these swift but highly fragile light carriers, the Battle Criers also brought along three additional vessels.

The Purple Star functioned as their logistics ship. She was smaller and less potent than any other logistics ships that Ves encountered. Her industrial capacity was tiny, but it was sufficient to service the needs of two regular mech companies during ordinary times.

The Belfast and Okuri were a pair of transport ships that carried most of the Kinner outfit's supplies. Smaller and lighter than a typical cargo hauler, they were also capable of landing on a planet. The Battle Criers often made use of this fact in the past by stuffing their cargo holds full with loot and salvage they scavenged off the battlefields.

As Ves recalled the composition of the Battle Crier fleet, he realized that each of its vessels shared a common trait.

They were fast. When Commander Cinnabar slowly built up his fleet, he prioritized the acquisition of fast but affordable starships.

Each of the vessels accelerated decently fast and their thrust-to-mass ratio each surpassed that of a skinny cargo hauler.

This turned the Battle Crier fleet into a fairly mobile element that could outrun any superior opponent while catching up to most inferior prey.

This was the kind of fleet composition one would find from a raiding force or a pirate force.

Obviously, the Battle Criers penchant for offensive missions was partially due to the vulnerability of their ships. They were very vulnerable to enemy fire if they ever ran into ambush. By taking action themselves, the Battle Criers could stow their ships somewhere safe and deploy their mechs at their leisure.

This didn't mean that their vessels fell apart after suffering a single volley of enemy fire, but Ves understood what Cinnabar meant when he said they were not used to taking on defensive missions.

"There are only two issues." Gavin continued, bringing Ves' attention back to the conversation. "First, the Ingvar siblings aren't really getting along well with the Battle Criers. Imon and Casella Ingvar may have fallen on hard times, but they used to be of noble blood. As for the Battle Criers..."

Ves immediately understood the problem. "Most of their ranks consists of Kinner vatters. The lowest-born citizens of the Kinner Tribe."

"Exactly. The two are getting along like fire and water by all accounts."

Ves sighed. The Battle Criers were a bunch of ruffians, which was fine to Ves but not to those who used to be aristocrats.

While he was tempted to order the Ingvar twins to tough it out and learn what mercenary life was really like, he didn't want to push them too far. Unlike the Kinner bondsmen he acquired, hired hands such as the Ingvars could leave whenever their contract ran out.

If Ves mistreated the pair too much, he could say goodbye to studying and exploiting their special spiritual property.

He sighed. "Call Commander Cinnabar and tell him to send the two brats to the Barracuda via shuttle. I'll take the pair off his hands for now."

"I'm sure the Ingvar siblings will be much relieved at your choice. However, taking them aboard this ship will mean they'll have to take a shuttle ride back to the Ion Tracker in case you want them to deploy with their mechs. The delay will be quite significant."

"I know, Benny, but the Battle Criers are already capable of fielding forty spaceborn mechs. If any threat we encounter is too much to handle for a full mech company, then adding an extra two mechs won't make much of a difference."

While neither of them thought this was the right solution, Ves couldn't come up with a better solution off the top of his head.

Once Gavin relayed the instructions, he addressed another issue.

"The second point I wanted to raise with you is our next destination. The situation at the Chuko Republic has deteriorated in recent weeks. Back when we set your itinerary, the news coming out of Chuko hadn't sounded this bad. I highly suggest you reconsider stopping by this state."

"No."

"It's dangerous!"

"It's still within an acceptable range." Ves retorted. "All the trouble popping up in the news happens in the periphery of the state. We are traveling nowhere near the trouble spots."

"I don't know, boss. If you ask me, Chuko is like a powder keg that can erupt at any moment. The central government is already on the edge of teetering."



"They've been saying that for years." Ves casually waved his hand. "A complete breakdown of order benefits no one except pirates. Everyone with a stake in the conflict is better off with the status quo."

Gavin failed to change his mind. Even though his concerns were valued, this only made the Chuko Republic more attractive.

A ton of different outfits and forces frequently clashed in the state. It had become a melting pot of various influences. Its weak internal security allowed neighboring states, dark mercenaries and even clandestine powers from Vicious Mountain to treat its territory as their playground.

A low-intensity struggle for power paralyzed the weak republic for two decades and counting, but the seeds of the conflict had been laid a long time ago. The trajectory of the Chuko Republic deteriorated with each year that passed, and the common citizens were the biggest victims of the lack of stability.

Compounding the problems plaguing the state was its enduring brain drain. Every professional with valuable skills emigrated elsewhere as soon as they could book a passage.

Even though the government and the local powers did their best to hinder the outflow of valuable scientists, doctors, administrators, artists, mech designers and mech pilots, they simply didn't have the strength to form effective blockades.

Blockades were very expensive. While they hindered people from leaving, they also hindered everyone trying to enter. The state couldn't afford to put up too many barriers lest they scare away the meager amount of trade that still sustained its fractured economy.

Certainly, anyone who heard about Chuko's conditions would steer away from the state like Ves ran away from Gloriana on their first date.

Not this time. Gloriana might creep him out, but the chaotic situation at Chuko was a walk in the park compared to the pervasive danger in the frontier.

Gavin sunk his shoulders and slunk out of the compartment. He did not look forward to entering a state where half-a-dozen skirmishes erupted on a daily basis.

That left Fe Nitaa.

"I won't need you looming over my shoulder while I'm in my stateroom."

"I'll stand guard outside the hatch."

"No need. Just relax or train. No one is able to sneak aboard our ship while we're traveling faster than light."

"I will still stand guard regardless during the periods when this ship is out of FTL."

Ves sighed. "Fine. Just don't tire yourself out, alright?"

"I can manage, sir." The tall woman grunted. "I am still getting used to my position."

"We're all getting used to this situation. I'm confident you can fulfill your duties."

"While I appreciate your confidence, I can't do everything."

"Look, I've already discussed this." He sighed. "Even if you aren't equal to the better bodyguards on Bloodstone, I'm more than willing to invest in your training. Gavin should have already set up a budget for you and Crindon. Both of you will be allowed to study and train in your free time."

Both Nitaa and Crindon received a couple of million bright credits each, which was more than sufficient for them to purchase specialized handbooks and virtual training courses from the galactic net.

Once Ves returned to the Bright Republic, he planned to usher his two bondsmen into specialized training programs. While the Kinner Tribe did a decent job in educating them both, they still had a lot more to go, and Ves was willing to invest in their development in order to increase their value.

Since both Kinner were in it for the long haul, he might as well try to elevate their quality so that he'd be able to enjoy a handsome return on investment over the lifetime of his bondsmen!

"Gotta milk them cows!" He grinned under his breath.

"Pardon, sir?"

Ves awkwardly coughed. "Nothing."

#### **Chapter 1329 Bootstraps**

"You called me! I'm so happy!" Gloriana gushed while pressing her slender palms against her chin. "I thought so long and hard about calling you, but you said you needed space so I refrained from calling you! If I knew you'd call me, I would have worn something cuter! Hey, I might as well do that now!"

She inputted a quick series of commands in her comm, causing her tight white lab coat to morph into an even slimmer sundress that tantalizingly showed a hint of promise.

"There! I can greet you properly now!"

"You didn't have to go through that trouble for me. I just wanted to talk to you about something."

"Nonsense! I will always present my best side to you! The perfect boyfriend deserves nothing less than the perfect girlfriend!"

As Ves awkwardly greeted Gloriana, Lucky padded over to the projection of Clixie.

Both cats pawed each other's bodies, only to go right through the intangible projections on their end.

They couldn't touch each other!

"Meooow."

"Miaow!"

Ignoring the distress of their pets, the pair of humans tentatively made themselves comfortable and sat down. The closeness of their respective projections gave them the illusion that they sat right next to each other.

"So, what did you want to talk about with little old me?" Gloriana smiled coyly while twirling around her lustrous dark hair. "Have you made up your mind already?"

"About what?"

"About tying the knot! Hihhi!"

"That's way too soon!" Ves hastily said. "I was hoping to raise a decision I've made recently. Although it sounds drastic, I think it's the best choice for me to develop."

Gloriana restrained herself upon seeing that Ves looked serious this time.

"Oh? What did your clever mind come up with this time?"

Here goes nothing. Ves took a deep breath before starting with the spiel he prepared.

"If you recall my design philosophy, then you will note how it isn't tied to mechs, but rather the interaction between mechs and humans. Studying mechs is easy. Studying humans is harder. Through my travels, I've realized that I improve significantly faster if I come across many different people and become exposed to different cultures, values and beliefs. For example, if I

hadn't visited the Ylvaine Protectorate, I would have never designed a fantastic custom mech like the Transcendent Messenger!"

Her eyes lit up. "I see! In my opinion, Your Transcendent Messengers are your best works! All six of them are fantastic in their own way, but together they make for a great set! You're already halfway to becoming a follower of hexism at this rate!"

"Let's not talk about that." Ves briefly grimaced.

"Awww.."

Producing six Transcendent Messengers was a complete coincidence! He was just fulfilling Calabast's commission! Besides, the True Believers managed to abscond with his prototype, thereby technically raising the amount of copies in the wild to seven!

"The nature of my design philosophy means I benefit a lot more from exploring different cultures." He continued. "Mechs may operate the same way regardless of where they are used, but the people who make use of them are vastly different from state to state, star sector to star sector, star cluster to star cluster. How can I ever design mechs that appeal to large swathes of human space if I only limit myself to a single star sector?"

"Is that why you are traveling around right now?"

"Yeah. I've already harvested some minor gains from visiting Centerpoint, Kamon and Kinner." He nodded. His travels were no secret to Gloriana. She probably ordered a hacker to lift the logs from the Barracuda a long time ago.

"Yet even though the Komodo Star Sector offers a lot of diversity, many of the cultures here used to be formed by historical fringe groups. It's very dangerous to assume the rest of human space is the same."

Some of what he said was true, but he also added in some exaggerations here and there to strengthen his case.

A hum emanated from Gloriana's mouth as she contemplated his words. "I can see how that's important to you. The mech pilots who use your mechs are all distinct from each other. My own specialty also explores the fit between mech and mech pilot. We're closely alike in this regard, hihi!"

He smiled. It seemed his argument managed to resonate with Gloriana. "Humans are different. Their needs are different. Exploring a multitude of different norms and values broadens my perspective and allows me to express my design philosophy in different ways. For this reason I've been contemplating something drastic, but extremely helpful to my development."

"You're building up to something. I can tell. Just tell me, Ves."

He decided to cut to the chase. "It's this.. While the Komodo Star Sector is both my home and my base of operations, I don't think I'll progress very fast if I remain cooped up inside this frontier star sector. I'm looking to move to a more developed star sector in an entirely different cluster. Vicious Mountain and Majestic Teal are both great destinations, but they're too close to home for me to experience something truly novel."

A silence fell in their conversation. Though their pets continued to meow at each other in the background, Gloriana paused for a moment.

"Journeyman can achieve great harvests when they travel, though they will have to set the right goals and choose the right destinations. Where do you intend to go and how long will you be away?"

"I haven't decided on my destination yet. I'll probably choose between one of the adjacent star clusters next to our own. As for the duration... I don't plan to take a brief vacation. I want to immerse myself in foreign cultures, and that means spending a long time abroad. Preferably, I'd like to adopt the nomadic spaceborn lifestyle and base myself on a fleet for a time. That will allow me to

experience the most cultures with the least amount of disruption during the decades while I'm away from home."

Making a fleet his principal base of operations during his travels also made him elusive and hard to pin down. He wanted to be ready to move at any moment in case the Five Scrolls Compact or some other threat wanted to sniff him out.

"Decades? Did I hear you wrong?"

"I'm very serious." Ves said gravely. "I know it's unusual for Journeymen to travel this much, but if you've studied my designs, you know that they possess unusual strength. The strength that my mechs relies upon.. will continue to hold regardless of how far I travel."

He couldn't be too direct with his explanation. The MTA prohibited him from talking about psionics, even to fellow mech designers. The two of them might be cleared for the information, but the people that eavesdropped on their conversations may not be authorized!

Ves also wanted to avoid revealing his insights on spirituality. While he fancied Gloriana to some extent, it was far too premature to reveal his secrets to her. Only when their relationship became more solid would he be willing to open himself up to his partner.

Still, the implications of what he said already dawned upon Gloriana. "Will this effect extend to my own design philosophy as well if we collaborate on a design?"

"I'm reasonably confident it will."

He already thought about what would happen. With the way the Aurora Titan—his first collaboration work with another contributing designer—shaped up, Ves was certain that Qilanxo's spiritual fragment possessed more than

enough juice to sustain its full strength even if Ves and Professor Ventag were gone.

As long as the design spirits continued existing, Ves may have already reached the most elusive goals of mech design, which was to achieve permanency in his designs!

While he didn't tell her about this impactful hypothesis, the claims he already revealed were more than enough to keep Gloriana occupied.

Shortly after he answered her question, she burst out into smiles. "Okay!"

"Okay what?"

"I'll accompany you! It'll be so romantic! Two loving mech designers touring the galaxy while exploring new ways to apply our design philosophies! It will be an unforgettable phase in our lives!"

"You.. you're okay with my intentions?"

"Sure!" She happily chirped. "I love you, you know that? I'll support you anyway I can. It's not like I have to pay a huge price to leave my home for a time. I'll miss my parents, but I'm sure I can get them to support our decision. It'll be so perfect! You and me, together on a cozy ship for years upon years upon years upon years upon—"

"—Okay, okay, I get it, Gloriana!" Ves interrupted her before she continued with her infinite loop. "I'm very glad you're okay with this. I don't plan to depart immediately. I'll have to make a lot of preparations, and I also have to make sure my enterprises in the star sector are capable of operating on their own."

His girlfriend vigorously nodded. "I'll pitch in! Let me take care of the fleet! I've just got a great idea! Why not let me arrange for a factory ship? That way, we can design and fabricate mechs on the go! It'll be perfect!"



The sheer enthusiasm and support from Gloriana overwhelmed Ves. He thought he faced an uphill battle in trying to persuade her to go along with his harebrained idea. Yet her adoration towards him made her much more pliable than he thought!

If there was one benefit to having an obsessive girlfriend, it was that Ves could get away with a lot more from his partner than usual!

Naturally, Ves was not naive enough to overlook that Gloriana had her own intentions. Her coy and devious smile she hid behind her fists as she squirmed on her seat already signalled to him that she was already developing her own plans for the upcoming journey!

Whatever she had in store, it was fine as long as she agreed to accompany him. Her status and wealth allowed her to obtain much better assets than he could ever obtain in the next ten years!

Ves briefly had the illusion that Gloriana was his sugar mommy. The disparity between their wealth and status effectively relegated him to a parasite who depended on his rich and powerful girlfriend to get the toys he wanted.

Yet so what? Though it stung his pride to depend upon his girlfriend, his life and freedom were far more precious than his worthless feelings!

With the Five Scrolls Compact presence in the local star cluster about to receive a massive boost from their brethren from the galactic center, Ves did not have the luxury to pull himself up by the bootstraps and build up a formidable caravan fleet by himself!

If Gloriana put her much greater financial strength to use in pulling up his bootstraps on his behalf, then by all means Ves was more than willing to play along!

As a man, he still felt bad for depending so much on a girl. Even if it was the most rational decision to make, he still disliked being the weaker partner of their relationship.

"Thank you, Gloriana. I know that my demands may have been a bit excessive, but I truly need this if I want to increase my hopes of advancing to Senior or Master within my lifetime."

His sincerity touched her deeply. She offered him a lovely smile.

"It's alright, Ves. No matter what kind of schemes you hatch, I'll always be there to support you. That's what girlfriends are for. You don't have to bear the weight of the galaxy on your shoulders by yourself. I'll always be there to take over the burden!"

Wasn't that what men were supposed to say to their women? Ves brushed aside his confusion.

"Since you're onboard with my plan, let me explain the details."

He began to elaborate on the decisions he made. Setting up this endeavor wouldn't be easy to Ves, but if Gloriana offered her own assistance, they could accomplish a great deal more!

Though Ves felt a little guilty for misleading Gloriana by withholding the true reason for this journey, he didn't think it was a big deal. Both of them stood to gain a lot of benefits from their travels, so that ought to be enough to justify his omissions.

### **Chapter 1330 Grand Expedition**

At the end of their lengthy conversation, Ves expressed his tiredness. Just as he said goodbye and cut the channel, Gloriana's projection leaned forward until her face was millimeters away from his own!

If they weren't talking by remote, she would have kissed by now!

"Tell me, Ves. Do you like me?"

"I do."

"Do you love me?"

"...Maybe. You know my feelings on this matter. A couple of meetings doesn't mean we're the right person for each other."

Obviously, Gloriana thought very differently about their compatibility. Ves did not need to be a telepath to know that she had already made up her mind concerning their relationship!

Despite his attempt to insert some distance into their relationship, she didn't seem discouraged. She was confident she could capture his heart!

She giggled. "Since you thought of me when you came up with this scheme, does that mean you consider me your girlfriend now?"

"Uhm.."

"DON'T YOU DARE SAY NO." She ferociously hissed.

"Uhm, yes! I'm happy that you're my girlfriend! I'm so lucky to have a smart, beautiful, and compatible woman by my side, hahaha!" He nervously laughed.

She turned all smiles again. "Great! It's official then! I'm glad you came around to the truth. Once we begin this grand expedition of yours, the two of us will become inseparable! Hihihi! You don't mind if I resume spreading the news of our happy union, right?"

"Ehhh..."

"Okie dokie! Goodbye, Ves! I'll call you next time!"

Her projection winked out as she quickly cut the call. Not only did Gloriana disappear from view, but Clixie left as well, leaving Lucky cut off in his own conversation with the organic cat.

"Meow!"

"Don't be so dramatic, Lucky! You'll have plenty more opportunities to play with Clixie."

He sank back into his seat to reflect on what he accomplished.

"Convincing Gloriana to put aside her ventures to travel with me was easier than I thought." He murmured.

All of the reasons he presented to justify his travels caught on remarkably easy. To be sure, he already knew that Gloriana didn't have to give up a lot to join him on his lengthy, generation-spanning journey.

To her, staying alongside Ves trumped every other concern. As long as they lived and worked together on a daily basis, their design philosophies would likely flourish by interacting with each other. Whether this took place in the Bright Republic, the Hexadric Hegemony or on a massive factory ship in the middle of nowhere didn't matter.

The only 'downside' to roping in Gloriana was that she expected more commitment from him. With all of the help she was willing to provide, Ves needed to play the role of a devoted boyfriend in order to keep her happy.

Trying to play nice with a woman like her was easier said than done. Yet Ves found it infinitely more preferable to deal with her mild version of craziness compared to the full-blown insanity that regularly plagued the researchers of the Five Scrolls Compact!

"If I have to choose between the two, I'd rather go with the option that wants me alive!"

Nonetheless, both choices entailed giving up a measure of his free-spirited freedom. To someone who prized his autonomy as much as him, this was a grievous price to pay.

Nothing came for free. Even the material assistance that Gloriana promised to prepare for their journey wasn't actually 'free'.

In essence, the two established an implicit contract with each other. In exchange for Gloriana's support, Ves would have to accept their relationship.

The moment Gloriana soured on him and their relationship ran aground, she would take away her factory ship and all of her other assets. Such a sudden parting would definitely weaken him to an enormous degree!

"Is this what a vulnerable woman has to worry about when they marry a powerful husband? How scary!"

Of course, the ironic part about this situation was that Gloriana firmly held the upper hand in their relationship. That was nothing strange to a hexer like her, but Ves couldn't stand the thought of depending on a woman for the rest of his life!

He shook his head. "I'll just have to work harder than her. One day, I'll be the one she has to look up to! I'm sure of it! No matter how exceptional she is, she can't beat my advantages!"

"Meow."

"You're dreaming, Lucky!"

After concluding his talk with his somewhat official girlfriend, Ves pushed the matter to the back of his mind. He had a lot of time to think and prepare for his grand expedition, as he already started calling it in his mind.

"I'm not going on a simple trip, but neither do I intend to abandon my home. An expedition sounds about right."

A lot of expeditions took place since humanity took to the stars. Space was so vast that there was always something to explore, especially in the vast but sparse periphery of the galaxy.

Most of them attempted to explore unsettled star systems and virgin planets, though. The grand expedition that Ves had in mind would not stray into dangerous territory blindly. He would just be replicating his current tour but on a much grander scale.

All that traveling around would not help him grow his business, he thought. That was until he heard Gloriana's offer of acquiring a factory for them. Depending on its scale, it might be possible for him to establish a viable mech manufacturing operation on the move.

He might be able to operate as a nomadic trading caravan, selling ship-produced mechs for all kinds of specialty goods and exotics from every state he passed through.

During each visit, he could evaluate whether the local conditions were favorable enough to set up a branch of the LMC in the state. If not, then no harm came to pass. There were plenty of states where the LMC could set up shop.

"Expanding the LMC isn't the main goal here. It's nice if I can expand its reach, but my own development comes first."

With all the goals he had set, trying to juggle them was becoming increasingly more difficult. His intentions to embark on his grand expedition disrupted many of his original plans.

The LMC at home would still do fine as long as he supplied his company with new designs on a regular basis. His personal absence would still make it difficult for the company to grow as fast as he previously hoped.

"A lot of business is accomplished through leveraging connections." He rubbed his chin. "Maintaining friendships with local stakeholders will be harder if I can only speak with them through comm calls."

Nonetheless, the slowdown in growth in the Komodo Star Sector could be compensated by the expansion he accomplished elsewhere. Ves had never pushed the LMC to pursue a strategy of local market dominance because his products were so peculiar and niche.

"My mechs are also more expensive in relation to their specs. Not everyone wants to buy a premium product."

Making his products available in many different markets allowed him to gather a handful of devoted customers in each different state. He would not have to make a huge investment in each individual market in order to squeeze aside the hefty competition and wrest away their precious market shares.

Lucky floated over to Ves and laid down on his lap.

"Meow."

"I know. We can't go on this grand expedition alone. We'll have to bring a whole host of people along."

He needed to bring a considerable amount of subordinates from the Avatars of Myth and the LMC along. Perhaps a considerable number of Larkinsons would join him in his expedition as well.

The problem was that he still needed to leave some people behind. Some might wish to stay at the Bright Republic considering that it was their home, but others might feel snubbed by him if he refused to take them along.

One of the main complicating factors of his grand expedition was its extensive duration. Ves planned to be gone as long as the Five Scrolls Compact still scoured the surrounding star sectors for whatever they were looking for that required the direct intervention of their Ruined Temple.

"They can't run roughshod over the star sector forever, though." He judged.

Eventually, the MTA and CFA would learn of the scope of the Compact's resurgence in the star cluster and begin to move against them. Even so, the complex environment of the Nyxian Gap would massively hamper their attempts to stamp out the resurgent Compact presence.

It would only be safe for him to return home under one of two conditions. Either the Big Two successfully chased out the Ruined Temple envoys, or they left this barren region of space on their own accord.

Either way, Ves loosely determined that might take two to four decades, which essentially spanned an entire generation.

"If I'm gone from home for thirty years, what will I encounter when I finally return home?"

Calsie would have grown middle-aged. His grandfather's health might deteriorate to an awful state. Many of the strongest serving Larkinsons such as Ark Larkinson might have retired from frontline service by then and transitioned into advisers, administrators or teachers.

Lanie Larkinson would bloom from a cute little sprout into a lovely young woman. Expert candidates such as Jannzi Larkinson and Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson would have matured into middle-aged expert pilots who already enjoyed a great career.

It dawned upon Ves that thirty years was an incredible amount of time to people who couldn't afford to undergo life-prolonging treatment.

Ves never worried about this issue since he went through three rounds of gene optimization treatment courtesy of the Starlight Megalodon, which pushed his estimated life expectancy to 180 years.

As a well-heeled Hexer Journeyman, Gloriana definitely wouldn't grow old and feeble anytime soon!



One of the reasons why the MTA encouraged pairings between high-ranking mech designers was because they stood a better chance at keeping each other company even if they lived through several centuries.

If Ves and Gloriana were truly committed to their relationship, then their pairing would be unlike that of a normal couple. Their lengthy lifespans allowed them to live through their lives at a vastly more gradual pace than others.

Yet just because they could take it slow didn't mean that the others were also so fortunate. The unfortunate reality was that the vast majority of people in the galaxy could never earn enough money to purchase the first round of life-prolonging treatment.

At best, as long as Ves advanced to Master in record speed, he might be able to afford his closest relatives and companions an extension of their lives.

He sighed and shook his head as he stroked Lucky's back. "It's not really an ideal situation. Short of being able to synthesize life-prolonging treatment myself, I'll just have to accept the fact that many people around me will grow old and die while I'm still healthy and spry."

Many high-ranking mech designers and even certain mech pilots faced this situation. The reason he was so melancholic about this reality was that going on his grand expedition entailed missing out on a huge chunk of those he left behind.

The Larkinsons he cared a lot about such as Melinda Larkinson and Raella Larkinson already pursued their own careers in Bentheim. Ves did not intend to pull them away from the lives they built for themselves, but leaving the Bright Republic for other parts of space meant that he would inevitably grow distant from much of his family.

"Well, staying in touch through the galactic net will help stave off our isolation to some extent."

Ves knew he would have to face this reality someday. His abrupt shift in plans only brought it forward ahead of time.

"I will still do it, though."

While he exaggerated a bit, he didn't lie when he stated that traveling a lot would help him progress faster.

This was important, because in order to deal with the Compact on a more permanent basis, Ves needed to grow in power and influence!

Just because he planned to run away like a rat did not mean he was content to stay a rat forever!