

Chapter Two: A New Contract

James arranged his cutlery on the empty plate before placing it farther away from him. He cleaned away crumbs and fragments of food from the table and dropped them onto the plate.

The sound of fingernails drumming against the table incessantly caused him to look up. Nox was staring at him with those piercing grey eyes.

"Ah, sorry... where were we?"

James apologised as he straightened in his chair. He wanted to order another drink, but felt that Nox might flip the table if he delayed their conversation any longer.

"No matter how good the food is, are you not able to do two things at once? I don't think I've ever seen anyone that dumbstruck by a damned steak. Did it render you deaf, or did you just decide you'd rather give it your full attention?"

Nox's voice was both cutting and exasperated, but her face showed a sliver of amusement at the situation.

There were titans of industry waiting downstairs for their chance to pitch a partnership with the Dread Captain.

What would they think if they knew he was merely sitting up at the table eating and nowhere closer to having a contract?

"I've never had steak before. Tempted to put it in as a condition of the contract now, it was fantastic!"

James grinned at Nox as he opened his hands and gestured towards the blank contract pad in front of them.

Nox sighed and shook her head ever so slightly before starting.

"In the previous contract that I made for you, the term was a single calendar year. As a sign of my confidence in you, I'll keep that condition in place."

The S-Classer tapped the contract in front of her, inputting the duration. A chuckle from the other side of the table caused her to pause.

James merely shook his head.

"You gain a lot more than I do by having a longer term contract. It prevents me from shopping around for a new sponsor and makes me beholden to you. The Paragons have rolling contracts with their sponsors, which gives them more agency."

James looked meaningfully at the still empty contract.

"I hope you'll take my loyalty to Nox Holdings into consideration if you're going to impose such a lengthy term of service."

Nox straightened ever so slightly, a predatory smile appearing on her lips. But James hadn't yet finished.

"Especially considering my current market value."

Nox tilted her head slightly to the side with a curious expression on her face.

"Your market value? And just what would that be?"

To anyone else, the question may have sounded playful... but James heard it for what it was. A threat.

This woman had bought a skyscraper to show him how insignificant he was to her. He was now seated in front of her, negotiating for his future.

James steeled himself. He wasn't some grateful E-Classer that was happy to have a chance at the big leagues. He had a reason to be here, and he now had his own goals and dreams to achieve.

"I'm the best player in Abidden."

Even as he said the words, James couldn't believe they came out of his mouth.

Nox's eyebrow cocked upward as she leaned closer.

"Go on..."

James matched her body language and closed the distance between them. He kept his voice firm and controlled. It wasn't the time to be emotional. If he was going to beat Nox, he needed to do it with facts.

All he needed to do was treat himself like a product, and it all made sense.

"Who do you think people want to hear about right now? An interview with Helena? Inviting Greaves to another chat show? No. They want to talk to me. My sponsor will name the price and control the narrative. That sponsor could drip feed information about me, at a controlled pace to keep interest at its peak."

The threatening aura flickered away, but Nox's head remained tilted in curiosity. Her silence was absolutely deafening, but James couldn't stop now.

"How long does it take to make a movie? Who will benefit from that surge of popularity when it releases? Will you still be my sponsor? There are a lot of considerations to make when we look at the duration of the contract."

James finally smiled at Nox, hoping it would ease some of the terrifying tension in the room.

A wistful sigh escaped Nox, breaking the silence in the room. She gave the contract a passing glance to the contract, before her eyes flicked back up to lock onto James'.

"So what would it cost me..."

Nox started as she toyed playfully with the contract pad in front of her.

"... to lock you into a contract for three years?"

Her expression was almost bored, but her eyes were studying him intently, waiting for his reaction.

James dodged her question. He needed the best terms possible, but to do that, he needed to build a much better case than what was currently on the table.

"As the top performing Wildcard, I'm the closest to earning a share percentage of Vendetta Enterprises."

Nox's expression was unreadable, so James just continued with his pitch.

"Any offer that I get today will need to give me confidence that I'll never drop to the bottom of the social ladder ever again. I don't care about money or fame. I want a future, and I think you can help me with that."

James leaned back in his chair, wishing he felt the confidence he was pretending to possess. Taking a steadying breath, he finally voiced his desire.

"To secure me into a three-year contract, I want to become a shareholder of Nox Holdings."

James had expected a derisive laugh or some form of incredulity from the S-Classifier, but he was instead met with a slight smile.

Nox did eventually laugh, but there was no mockery in it. It was a pleasant sound, as though she were genuinely bemused by the situation.

"You want to invest in me?"

Her question felt rhetorical, but James couldn't stop himself from answering.

"Yes, and if it was possible, I would like your guidance for scaling up Travesty Holdings."

Nox drummed her fingernails against the table once more, her expression thoughtful.

"I could sit here and play with you all day, but I've a business to run."

The sound of fingernails stopped and James watched as Nox pulled the contract towards herself.

"I don't like poor investments, James. I don't make them. So, I need to know if you're a poor investment. Was that Class Quest the best you'll achieve in Abidden, or will there be more to come?"

There was no hazing, or stare down this time. It was simply Nox asking him a straight question.

James didn't even hesitate.

"I'm going to be the first player to kill a God."

Nox could only laugh as she looked back down at the blank contract.

"I actually can't wait to see that."

James was a bit startled at how genuine Nox sounded. For the briefest of moments, he forgot she was an S-Classer.

Nox started tapping different areas of the contract, selecting various drop downs and making lightning quick adjustments to the document. There was little to no hesitation as she progressed, barely acknowledging James, who merely sat in silence. After a few more moments of quiet tapping, Nox spoke, as if to explain the logic behind her unseen choices.

"You said yourself that you've no interest in the commercial opportunities waiting downstairs, so I'll take them for myself. I'll give you a modest share of the receipts so you won't have to look too pained in any future advertisements."

Her voice was matter of fact, and James genuinely couldn't tell if she was speaking to herself or to him.

"I'll also take the commercial decisions, most of which will happen after our chat! I'll still need you to smile and look very excited by all the prospects that you'll have no control of."

Nox glanced up to give him a slight wink, her slender fingers not missing a beat as they continued to tap away at the screen.

"We'll keep all those obligations from the last time. You still need to keep favourable ratings in-game. Develop some properties and defeat Heroes. Yeah, we'll keep that in there."

Nox's finger hesitated over one column. Her eyes looked up and studied James, as if searching for an answer in his expression.

With a sudden click of her fingers, she decided and cast her gaze back down to the selection in front of her.

James really wanted to lean across to see what she was inputting, but knew he needed to show restraint. The negotiation still wasn't over, and he needed to keep his composure.

A tsking sound brought him out of his momentary reverie.

Nox's eyes were back on him, looking once again for an unknown answer.

"If you want to invest in me... it's going to cost you. Are you going to be okay with that?"

Her question was pointed, but there was no threatening tone to be found.

"Yes."

James barely said the word, and Nox was back tapping away at her proposal.

"Good answer."

He could hear the smile in her voice, and couldn't help but mirror it himself. It truly was such a bizarre turn of events.

After another few torturous moments of silence, Nox finally leaned back with a smile on her face. Her hand pushed the contract tablet across the table, where it slid to a halt directly in front of James.

"There's my first and final offer."

Sponsorship Partnership - James Sylvester & Nox Holdings

Contractual Obligations:

- Forfeit all commercial rights of Abidden Character.
- Forfeit all commercial decisions to Nox Holdings.
- Uphold Nox Holdings Brand Standards:
 - *Maintain Favourable Ratings (Influences Performance Bonus)*
 - *Develop Territory / Properties within Abidden (Influences Performance Bonus)*
 - *Defeat Heroes (Influences Performance Bonus)*
- Elevate Status from E-Class to A-Class within 36 months.
- Elevate Travesty Holdings to Profitable Status within 36 months.
- Attend Bi-Weekly Lunches / Dinners with Nox.

Benefits:

- \$2,500,000.00 Monthly Payment (Fixed)
 - \$1,500,000.00 allocated to Nox Holdings Share Purchase Programme.
 - \$1,000,000.00 allocated as Player Salary / Stipend.
- \$800,000.00 Monthly Rig Costs (Fixed)
 - Surplus amounts will be refunded to Nox Holdings.
- Penthouse Apartment in the *Dread Tower*
- VIP Status across Nox Holdings Properties & Affiliates
 - *Access to Nox Holdings Accelerator Programme*
 - *Access to Nox Holdings Auction Syndicate*
- Personal Executive Assistant (To Be Hired)
- Personal Brand Team (To Be Hired)

Royalty Share:

Travesty Holdings:

- *Landlord of:*

- *E-Class Accommodation "Building 516" (Outer Districts)*

- *D-Class Accommodation "Apartment TBC" (District TBC)*

- *5% of all Commercial Receipts related to Dread Pirate Merchandise.*

- *10% of all Property Receipts related to the Dread Tower.*

- *Proceeds will purchase preferential stock options of Nox Holdings at 25% below market value.*

- *Dividends will be reinvested into stock purchase programme.*

- *Ownership of Travesty Holdings*

- *James Sylvester, Director - 75%*

- *Nox, Director (Non Voting)- 15%*

- *William Greenfield, Director (Non Voting) - 5%*

- *Mildred Clayton, Director (Non Voting) - 5%*

Contract Term:

- 3 years, (36 months)

James' eyes immediately darted towards the benefits section. If he was going to put his plan into action, he'd need money. When his eyes landed on the salary, he froze. All composure and acting that had gotten him this far had completely dissolved.

It was more money than he could have possibly imagined. The calculations he had made were completely blown out of the water, and it still wasn't everything. There was no way for him to lose money like in the last contract, and his Rig fees were completely taken care of.

The contract was fantastic, and much better than he had envisioned. His eyes scanned the whole thing, looking for a catch. He noticed that sixty percent of his wages would be spent on buying shares, but that was exactly what he wanted.

James didn't know what the auction syndicate or accelerator programme was, but he hoped they were in response to his plea for Nox to help him scale Travesty Holdings.

At the thought of his business, James glanced down to the end of the contract to see if there had been any changes to their agreements.

James stared dumbly at the section in absolute disbelief. There was no way it was real.

Nox's playful voice found its way to his ears.

"I like that expression. It suits you."

His voice, which had done so well throughout the negotiation, finally broke.

"Is... this real?"

Nox smiled at him.

"I told you before, I'm going to keep you."

James barely nodded as he stared at the same words on the document.

10% of all Property Receipts related to the Dread Tower

Nox glanced at the sentence he was so fixated on.

"If you sign that contract, you're tied to me for the next three years. Are you prepared for that?"

James could only laugh at the question. He was never more sure of anything in his life.

"I'm looking forward to it, Nox!"

With that said, James took the stylus that sat unused in the centre of the table and signed the contract.

Nox extended her hand and James gratefully shook it. The S-Classer didn't release his hand immediately, and instead turned his wrist to reveal his interface attachment.

A dissatisfied expression crossed her features, and fear sprung up in James.

A part of his brain went into overdrive that he had missed something, and that something was wrong.

That slums mentality was a surefire way to make his anxiety flare up, but it was completely unfounded.

Nox just shook her head with a rueful expression.

"You should upgrade that as soon as you can. It's like wearing a sign that says you're an E-Classer."

Releasing his hand, Nox took a step back before halting, her eyes now glancing over his body.

James didn't know how to react, so he just stood still and let it happen.

Nox's expression grew a little more thoughtful as a smile returned to her face.

"You're looking healthier. But, do something about those clothes before our first lunch date."

James couldn't believe it. A simple sentence from Nox had explained why everyone treated him like dirt, despite him having nicer clothes.

With that thought finally resolved, Nox's last sentence finally processed in his exhausted brain.

His eyes widened, which elicited a laugh from Nox.

"Whatever is currently going through your head, get rid of it. It's time to meet the vultures."

At those very words, irate voices sounded up from the level below. James looked down the stairs to see Hobbs approaching with a large bottle of champagne. Behind him was an entire procession, carrying smaller bottles and trays with glasses.

The staff stood respectfully to one side as the advertisers, producers, and brand specialists all made their way up the stairs to the boardroom table.

Dissatisfied and grumpy expressions melted away to reveal practiced smiles and feigned enthusiasm. Many of them rushed forward to gush about his performance in Abidden. It oddly reminded James of how practically every sponsor had drooled over the Paragons just a few weeks ago.

More and more people ascended the stairs, dressed in garish colours and materials that James had never seen. Each one of them made it their mission to say something flattering to him, trying to gain his favour.

A small box was pressed into his hand and James barely saw a man wink at him before turning away to take a seat.

James glanced at Nox, as if to ask how he should react to their greetings, but the S-Classer was absolutely no help in her introduction.

"James Sylvester, meet the absolute worst leeches of high-society. Leeches, this is Legendary Dread Captain Sylvian."

Nox's cold persona was back with a vengeance.

"He's signed over all commercial rights to me. So you're all kissing the wrong ass right now."

Awkward silence filled the room for the briefest moment, only to be broken by James' explosive laughter.