

Mech 2009

Chapter 2009 Lost Kin

Ves visited multiple ships and groups after he departed from the Redfeather.

He visited a civilian ship which housed many of the Larkinsons and their families.

He dropped by a vessel which had been converted into company ships by the LMC.

He even took the time to travel to the Jaded Sword in order to speak with Commander Dise and learn how the Swordmaidens were faring these days.

Ves recalled the immense contribution the Swordmaidens had made during the Battle of Kesseling VIII. Without their crucial assistance in taking down the CRC knight mechs, the battle on the ground might have been lost!

The Swordmaidens paid a very heavy price for that, though. They lost around half of their landbound mechs and a slightly smaller proportion of mech pilots. The former pirates were still very depressed about the losses.

A grim-faced Commander Dise calmly greeted Ves. "Hello."

"Hello, commander."

The dark-skinned pirate commander looked more solemn and focused than he had last seen her. Due to the unusual way she became an expert candidate back on Aeon Corona VII, the vibe she exuded possessed a lot of familiarities to Qilanxo.

It was a mistake to think Dise was of the same mind as the sacred god. As Ves took the time to inspect her spiritual attributes, she still maintained a very offensive focus.

Still, Ves saw some encouraging signs that she was finally beginning to reconcile her own martial path with the strength bestowed by Qilanxo. It seemed that Dise was leveraging her responsibility as a leader and caretaker of the Swordmaidens as a way to find something in common with the protective beast.

Hopefully, this would be enough for Dise to surpass her final bottleneck and undergo apotheosis. After all of the ordeals the Swordmaidens had gone through, they certainly deserved some good news!

"Please don't mind our current condition. We are still adjusting to all of the changes."

"That's understandable."

The Swordmaidens didn't stare and gawk at him as much as he expected. Instead, there were plenty of Swordmaidens who were pretty happy with ignoring his existence entirely!

While it was a bit refreshing to be treated as a normal person, a part of Ves still felt a bit concerned about their lack of enthusiasm.

"You Swordmaidens don't seem very happy with my presence." He observed.

Commander Dise frowned. "Too many sisters died to save your hide. To many of us, this tradeoff isn't worth it. Much of those sisters have been with us for decades. It took an immense amount of effort to train them to the standard that we expect of our mech pilots. To have so many of them fall is almost as worse as losing all of the Swordmaidens on Aeon Corona VII. It doesn't help that these losses happened recently at the same time the Sand War broke out. So far, we still haven't been able to replenish our ranks."

"Are you having recruitment problems? Can I do anything to help?"

The Swordmaiden Commander shook her head. "No thanks. In the previous months, we already picked up a large batch of young women among the refugees. It takes a long time to train them up, though. It might take a decade or longer before we are back to our old level of strength."

That sounded way too long to Ves. While he understood that it was how the Swordmaidens always conducted their training, it might not be necessary to stick to their primitive training methods.

"We have plenty of training resources to accelerate the training of your Swordmaidens. You helped save my life, so the least we can do is to make up for your losses." Ves offered.

"No need, Mr. Larkinson. Calabast has already made arrangements for us. Don't think your mech pilots are the only ones who are looking to promote to second-class mech pilots."

Those arrangements soon became clear when Ves started his tour through the Jaded Sword. Amidst the rigid Swordmaidens practicing their swordsmanship, the younger prospects undergoing hellish training in order to raise them to the standard of the older women and the 'indentured' men performing most of the lesser work, he suddenly realized something very profound.

"Your Swordmaidens share a lot in common with the Hexers!" He gasped.

"Is that a surprise to you?" Commander Dise smirked at him. "To be honest, I never thought she shared so many similarities with the Hexers either. Back when we were

confined to the frontier, we never thought about this relation. Civilized space was too alien to us, and a powerful second-rate state has no reason to get involved with a small pirate outfit like ours."

"Are the Hexers really uninvolved with the creation of your outfit?" Ves skeptically asked.

"You'd have to ask Commander Lydia." She shrugged in response and lowered her tone. "In truth, I'm not entirely clear about the circumstances behind the founding of the Swordmaidens. Ostensibly, Commander Lydia shaped the Swordmaidens by herself while relying on secret backing from the Reinald Republic."

"Who exactly was Commander Lydia? She shouldn't have come from nowhere. How was she able to form the Swordmaidens and grow it into an elite outfit in the most difficult circumstances imaginable?"

Commander Lydia started her outfit from scratch. Even though she received a lot of financial support, she started off with no organization, no reputation and few existing assets! She had to build up an entire organization in the frontier, a region where danger lurked in every corner and where potentates and mech pilots were not only rare, but also started off with awful foundations!

In hindsight, the emergence of the Swordmaidens as a force to be reckoned with in the frontier sounded very suspicious. If Commander Lydia was truly responsible for its successful rise, then she was anything but an average leader!

The resilience and leadership abilities shown by someone like her should be very unusual! It was impossible for her to be so competent if she came from the frontier!

"Do you think.. That the founder and former commander of your outfit was a Hexer?"

"Almost every Swordmaiden has bought into this theory." Commander Dise admitted. "There are too many coincidences to ignore this possibility. The fact that many of our customs are exactly in line with the Hegemony's traditions is too obvious, especially now that we have become more exposed to Hexers."

"What does Calabast think?"

"Even she agrees. She has taken a look at all of our surviving records, and while there isn't any hard evidence, she has made the same conclusion. According to her, Commander Lydia was likely a Hexer officer who fell victim to one of the intrigues that took place in the Hegemony. I can't imagine what drove her to flee all of the way to the frontier, but I'm thankful she did. A lot of our Swordmaidens would have led much worse lives if not for Commander Lydia's efforts."

Ves had very mixed feelings about this conclusion. It turned out that his visit to Centerpoint wasn't the start of his entanglement with Hexers. With everything the Swordmaidens had done so far, Ves respected them immensely. To find out that they were effective surrogate Hexers left a sour taste in his mouth.

Still, he refused to allow his biases to color his impression of the Swordmaidens. Regardless of their Hexer DNA, they had still fought valiantly during the crucial ground battle at Kesseling VIII. The inspiring sight of their swordsman mechs dragging down the floating knight mechs of the CRC was something that he would never forget!

As the tour proceeded, Ves asked a couple of perfunctory questions to which Commander Dise always answered in a perfunctory manner.

Ves had a feeling that Commander Dise respected Calabast a lot more than himself! She didn't consider Ves to be her boss or superior at all!

"Ever since we got rolled into the Black Cats, we are trying to find a new identity. We're no longer the daughters of the frontier. Perhaps we'll all be donning black uniforms soon."

"Do you object to the transition?"

"Don't get me wrong, Mr. Larkinson. We are not opposed to change. It's just that we are unsure which direction we should be developing towards. We want to preserve as much of our original Swordmaiden traditions as possible, but we don't want to remain weak and marginal. Since everyone is constantly growing stronger, we have to keep up as well or risk getting left in the dust."

That was very evident from the persistent training that took place aboard the Jaded Sword. Hardly any woman was idling around! If the Swordmaidens weren't on patrol, they were challenging themselves in virtual simulations. If they weren't training their mech piloting skills, they were training their swordsmanship.

Just like a genuine elite outfit, the Swordmaidens were truly dedicated towards their profession!

Ves noticed something very noteworthy though. As he toured some of the training venues, he suddenly halted.

"Are those.. Hexers?"

"Yes." Commander Dise grinned. "Calabast managed to secure some trainers to help us in our training. In particular, the Hexer mech instructors have been helping us learn the principles of piloting second-class mechs. Your people aren't the only ones who are looking forward to piloting higher-classed mechs!"

That didn't sound so strange. Calabast would be a fool to neglect the development of her Swordmaidens.

What truly shocked Ves was that the Hexer mech instructors didn't just wear the uniform of the Glory Battalion.

A couple of the trainers who attracted an immense amount of respect from the Swordmaidens happened to wear the uniform of the Penitent Sisters! The ♂ emblem on their chests were simply too glaring to ignore!

Commander Dise was perceptive enough to notice his stare. "The Penitent Sisters eagerly dispatched their own trainers to assist in the training of my Swordmaidens. The Hexers have been quite generous, actually. I think we are pretty much the only element in the fleet that meets their approval. The Sisters don't like the Glory Battalion very much."

"Oh?" That sounded strange to Ves! "What makes the Penitent Sisters so friendly towards your Swordmaidens?"

"I think they believe that Commander Lydia might have been one of theirs. Even if that isn't true, our former commander probably shared a lot in common with them. The Sisters pretty much treat us Maidens as their lost kin due to those suspicions."

That.. was a very unexpected development to Ves. He thought the Penitent Sisters had always been keeping to themselves when they joined the fleet, but it seems the Sisters were already starting to reach out to certain elements.

"Does Calabast know about this?" He worriedly asked.

"She facilitated this exchange." Commander Dise grinned.

That sounded exactly like something Calabast would do. Ves furrowed his brows. Didn't his strategic partner realize how crazy the Penitent Sisters were? What if they radicalized the Swordmaidens?!

Though Ves had to admit that the Swordmaidens were already similar to the Hexers in many ways, the Penitent Sisters were some of the worst the Hegemony had ever produced!

He groaned and palmed his face. "It looks like I need to have another talk with Calabast."

After finishing his tour aboard the Swordmaiden flagship, Ves headed back to the shuttle. Before he left, he asked one more question to Commander Dise.

"If the Swordmaidens received the option to join the Larkinson Clan, would you and your sisters accept this option?"

"Yes."

His heart sank at this answer. Though the Swordmaidens deserved to be rewarded for their contributions to the Larkinson Clan, he was very reluctant to turn these de-facto Hexers into Larkinsons!

"Is that because Calabast told you or is this what you Swordmaidens truly want?"

"This is our own choice." Commander Dise reiterated. Her spiritual potential flared! "For our entire lives, we worked hard to eke out an independent existence. Only later on did we slowly realize that it's too difficult to rely on ourselves. For better or worse, we need to shelter under an umbrella. As much as we don't share that much in common with your clan, you Larkinsons are quite nice. Unlike others, I feel I can trust you Larkinsons to respect my Swordmaidens as equals and fellow mech pilots. As long as we can maintain our own traditions, we have no objections to joining your clan!"

Though Ves appreciated the compliment, he was a lot less sure about the sentiment behind it! "Why don't you join the Hexers?"

"We're trash from the frontier, Ves. Do you truly think the elitist Hexers will accept us in our ranks? Just because we are like-minded women doesn't mean we all get along!"

"I see."

He didn't.

Chapter 2010 The Word of a Noble

Ves met with plenty more elements of his fleet after his visit to the Swordmaidens.

He spoke with familiar faces like the Ingvar siblings, who were still trying to unearth the potential of the Bright Warriors.

The Second Spaceborn Company of the Avatars of Myth only recently got to play with their new toys.

Due to various reasons, Commander Melkor opted to concentrate the best and bright mech pilots such as Joshua and Jannzi into the First Spaceborn Company. His goal was to create a pseudo-honor guard unit that the rest of his Avatars could look up to and aspire towards joining.

That said, the Second Spaceborn Company was no slouch. It was led by the young but capable Commander Casella Ingvar and fielded its own mech champion in the form of Imon Ingvar.

Though Imon was not as skilled or as fast of a learner as Joshua, his excellent pedigree and upbringing meant that his foundation was very solid. In fact, he was considerably more capable than any other ordinary Larkinson pilot of his generation!

Ves approved of Melkor's trust towards the Ingvar siblings. Both of them possessed remarkable spiritual potential that he hoped to exploit in the future.

So far though, their true potential hadn't been unearthed yet. Though they faced plenty of life-threatening situations during the Battle of Kesseling VIII, none of his mech pilots managed to achieve any breakthroughs, including his expert candidates.

"It's a lot easier to break through in a war than in an incidental battle." He muttered.

The odds of promotion were so low that it was like winning the jackpot. It took many battles for a mech pilot to roll the right dice and find an opportunity to advance to the next rank.

He shouldn't hold any unrealistic fantasies. Plenty of his own relatives joined the Mech Corps by the hundreds and fought more battles than he could count, yet only two to four managed to advance per generation!

"Not everyone can advance as easily as Jannzi, and even she encountered a bottleneck."

From what he knew, expert pilots were extraordinary because they based their entire creed on a specific goal or ideal. While they gained an unimaginable amount of strength after taking their first steps towards godhood, they had to let go some of their mortal aspects during their long journey towards ascension.

Ves believed that this was the most difficult aspect about breaking through. Plenty mech pilots were attached to their human traits. It was not so easy to let go of the identity the mech pilots acquired at birth!

When his shuttle arrived at the light carrier bearing the Second Spaceborn Company, Ves greeted the Ingvar siblings while at the same time inspecting their spiritual potential.

Though he believed that their spiritual potential had grown a bit since the last time he gauged their strength, it was difficult to ascertain any differences.

Though the observation disappointed him a bit, Ves did his best to maintain a positive demeanor.

"I've heard good things about your command ability, Captain Ingvar."

The nobleborn woman couldn't help but beam with pride. "Commander Cinnabar deserves a lot of credit for my performance. I learned many valuable lessons while I was aboard his Ion Tracker. The way he commands the Battle Criers is truly masterful. I am still in the process of developing my own leadership style."

Her words downplayed her own ability, but Ves spent too much time with manipulative people to understand her underlying intent. He hadn't forgotten how sad and bedraggled she looked when she was looking for a job in Kinner space.

In her first command position, her own crew mutinied against her and her former house! Though Ves probably wouldn't have managed to do any better in her position, her first command still represented a major blemish in her record!

Whereas many people would have given up command opportunities entirely after such a shameful outcome, Casella Ingvar was not one of them. She had studied and committed too much time and effort on her chosen vocation to give up after a single failure!

To her credit, she managed to earn Commander Melkor's trust, or else she would have been removed from her position by now. With the sheer amount of mech pilots the Avatars recruited, at least some of them were officer material.

As Ves walked around the mech hangar to inspect the Bright Warriors, he inquired how she was doing.

"The Battle of Kesseling VIII was the first major battle of the current incarnation of the Avatars of Myth, sir." She explained. "I'm aware that your Avatars fought some other battles, but they don't compare to our latest engagement in terms of scale and sophistication. Though we have prepared well, what truly took place was more than we could handle. If not for the timely introduction of the Bright Warrior, the battle in space would have likely ended in defeat!"

The CRC attack force planned their surprise assault on mistaken assumptions. The Fridaymen believed that the spaceborn contingent of the Avatars and Living Sentinels would consist entirely of third-class mechs.

The arrogant second-raters never imagined that Ves would add a bridge mech to his force lineup that could defeat their powerful mechs in open combat!

Sure, Joshua in the Quint may have been responsible for the majority of kills, but the Bright Warrior design had made all the difference in orbit!

As Ves studied the energy of the personnel around him, the Second Spaceborn Company was inordinately proud to be one of the first units to receive this exciting mech model.

The Larkinson vibes exuded by the mechs not only peppered up every Larkinson, but also every other soldier!

Ves didn't need to ask how committed they were towards his clan. The Bright Warriors had already done a great job at encouraging them to align themselves with the Larkinsons!

"Are there any practical problems hindering the progress of your mech company?" He asked.

"Hm, there are the usual issues, but they are not worth bringing up to your attention." Casella replied. "There are other mech companies that require much more attention. The Avatars still don't possess a full lineup of Bright Warriors. In fact, many of our mechs are still lastgen models."

"I'm aware. Right now, our financial outlook isn't optimistic enough to splurge on new mechs. While I am doing my best to remedy this situation and design some more mechs to fill up the holes in our mech lineup, it will take months to see a difference."

"Thank you for your concern, sir. Working for a mech designer like you is always better for mech pilots like us. You are much more prone to outfit us with the right mechs for the job."

That was a given. Successful mech designers usually possessed deep pockets and were very willing to invest in their own protection. If not for his immense responsibilities, his Avatars would have been fully kitted out with modern mechs and sturdy combat carriers by now!

Ves finally broached the subject he truly wanted to ask.

"I'm sure you have heard the latest rumors. If you have the choice to join the Larkinson Clan, will you accept the opportunity?"

Casella Ingvar knew this question was coming as well. She sighed. "This is a difficult matter. The question may not trouble most of my men who come from ordinary backgrounds, but my brother and I are different. We are one of the few surviving descendants of House Ingvar. When the Royal House of the Black Poppy turned against my house, my brother and I both wanted to take revenge."

"You won't be able to do that if you join the Larkinson Clan." Ves plainly said. "Our clan doesn't have any intersection with the Kingdom of the Three Flowers. As much as I sympathize with your plight, it's not our responsibility to avenge the fall of your house."

"I'm aware of that. I would never want to impose my private goals onto you. That is simply too unfair. It's just.."

"Just tell him the truth, Casella." Someone else piped up from the side.

"Brother!"

Imon Ingvar, as brash and impulsive as ever, interjected himself in the conversation. He left the side of his Nova Warrior to join his sister and nominal superior.

"I'm not sure if you are aware of this, Mr. Larkinson, but we nobles take our oaths quite seriously." The male Ingvar elaborated. "It is a great dishonor to break our word. In public, our fellow peers will ridicule us if we tarnished our credibility in such a fashion. In private, we would always feel ashamed for abandoning a promise we

"Imon!" Casella lost her cool and gritted her teeth. "Do you want to air all of our dirty laundry while you are at it? There is no reason to burden Mr. Larkinson with our personal dilemmas!"

"I don't want to dance around this subject any longer, sister. Let's settle this here and now in front of our boss."

Ves blinked. Evidently, this problem was a lot more serious than he thought. The Ingvar twins looked genuinely torn!

Captain Ingvar looked apologetic. "Sorry, Mr. Larkinson. We have been discussing our place in the Avatars and our purpose for a very long time."

"What choice are you inclined towards?"

"I.. favor looking forward." She spoke in a softer tone. "While I was born and raised an Ingvar, our noble house is effectively no more. The few remnants who survived will never be able to return to power. I think that joining your clan and taking up the Larkinson name is a good way to make a clean break from a forsaken past!"

Clearly, her brother didn't agree with that sentiment. Imon growled but did his best to restrain his conduct in front of someone important.

"We are some of the only remaining survivors of an honorable and prestigious house! Without it, we lose any right to call ourselves nobles!"

"Does that even matter, brother?!" Casella placed her hands on her hips. "We lost these privileges years ago! Ever since we turned into fugitives, no one else but us still thinks that we are nobles! It's time to face the truth and recognize that we are on the same level as everyone else in this fleet!"

A brief back-and-forth ensued. The rest of the Second Spaceborn Company seemed to be used to this spectacle. They quickly walked away and made themselves scarce.

"Okay, enough." Ves raised his hand, silencing the Ingvars in an instant. "I understand the gist of your dilemma. While I won't force you to make a specific choice, I just want to tell you that you need to commit to whatever decision you settle upon. If you choose to join the Larkinson Clan, then I expect you to forget about any noble attachments or commitments. I don't want any double loyalties in my clan."

Both Ingvars grimaced, but not too much. They already expected this answer.

Ves didn't leave it at that, though. He couldn't help but make a final suggestion before he left.

"Personally, I think you are going about this the wrong way. If you reject the opportunity to join the Larkinson Clan, what then? Will you eventually leave the Avatars and try to organize a rebellion against the Royal House of the Black Poppy? What can you do by yourselves with a couple of mechs, no army and a limited amount of funds at your disposal?"

"We'll figure something out. There are plenty of rebels in the Kingdom of the Three Flowers." Imon muttered.

"Heh. Most of these rebel movements are simply rabble. They can exist for centuries without ever coming close to meeting their goals!"

The contempt in the faces of Imon and Casella showed that they held the same contemptuous attitude towards rebel movements.

Ves smiled and spread his hands. "Instead of trying to do everything by yourself only to fail due to lack of resources, why not join my clan and stay? Once you become a Larkinson and distinguish yourself, you are entitled to a lot more rewards than now. As our clan achieves success and becomes richer, some of our newfound wealth will flow into the pockets of clan members such as you. What do you think you can do with a million hex credits? What if you receive a billion hex credits a century later? That is enough money to equip several mercenary outfits!"

Both of their eyes brightened as they realized the potential this approach held.

"As long as there are still survivors you can trust to put your money to good use, you can benefit your cause a lot better if you finance House Ingvar's rise instead of trying to do everything yourself!"

His persuasion had a powerful effect. Imon, the most stubborn one among the Ingvars, look convinced!

"With enough money, we can topple the House of the Black Poppy!" He exulted. "Who says we can't revive our fallen house? Mr. Larkinson is right! We don't have to be there in person to make everything right! We just have to provide the funds!"