

## Mech 2017

### *Chapter 2017 Accolade*

"Joshua King." Ves spoke as the young mech pilot approached his throne. "Born on Cloudy Curtain, graduated from Meirling Mech Academy with honors. Enlisted in the Avatars of Myth after graduation and fought alongside other Avatars in the Sand War. He has always been a valiant defender when he joined our ranks. However, it is his actions during the Battle of Kesseling VIII that is truly worthy of merit!"

He waved his arm, causing a prepared projection to come into life. Though many Larkinsons had already reviewed the footage or took part in the space battle, the montage running above everyone's heads highlighted the heroism of the mech pilot in question!

The Quint was the most impressive copy of the Bright Warrior, even if it wasn't immediately obvious.

Regardless, the masterwork mech was in its lancer mech configuration during the battle. Its magnificent charges and powerful impacts against the CRC mechs repeatedly stunned the audience.

As third-raters, the Larkinsons harbored a huge amount of respect towards second-class mechs! Their military heritage and intimate familiarity of mechs meant that every Larkinson was aware of the vast gulf between a third-class mech and a second-class mech!

Even though the Quint was a masterwork, even though its quality level bridged the gap, even though there were a lot of friendly mechs providing valuable cover, Joshua still faced overwhelming odds!

CRC mech after CRC mech slowly succumbed to the Quint. Though it was significantly easier for Joshua to take out his targets due to the Fist of the Faithful empowering the lancer mech configuration, the second-class mechs still possessed a lot of advantages!

"Through Joshua's valiant efforts, our forces in space achieved an overwhelming victory against the Coalition Reserve Corps, defeating the attempt to block our escape into space! The difference that he and many loyal mech pilots and support personnel have made in orbit far surpasses the contributions made by our relatives. Each of us owe our lives and freedom to Joshua and his comrades! Let us show our appreciation to his efforts!"

With a little nudge from the Golden Cat, several Larkinsons began to stand up and clap. Soon, the rest of the assembly members joined the standing ovation!

The honor bestowed upon Joshua slowed down his steps. He felt thankful for receiving so much appreciation. He felt nervous to be put under the loop.

When he initially joined the Avatars of Myth, all he wanted was to pilot Ves Larkinson's mechs.

That dream had come true. Piloting a masterwork mech like the Quint was an unsurpassable privilege that Joshua felt thankful for every day!

He knew the value of this mech and was very cognizant of the fact that piloting it was a privilege instead of a right!

As soon as Joshua proved himself unworthy to pilot this great machine, his superiors wouldn't hesitate to take it away!

For this reason, Joshua continued to invest himself in training while diligently following every order without reserve.

Piloting a Bright Warrior mech made it a lot easier for him to get in tune with the values of the Larkinson Clan! Spending time with Jannzi and other Larkinsons allowed him to get very familiar with how the Larkinsons distinguished themselves on other mech pilots.

He envied their strong family bonds. Each Larkinson treated each other with a greater intimacy they showed towards their friends and colleagues.

While this didn't sound so unusual, Joshua recognized that there was something more than shared blood tying them all together!

As a Brighter who came from an ordinary family from Cloudy Curtain, Joshua always felt a bit left out in their presence. There was nothing particularly wrong about this as the Larkinsons never set out to exclude their fellow colleagues. It was just frustrating to be left outside their exclusive club.

As Joshua stopped a few steps before the raised platform bearing the thrones, he quietly hoped that might this day. His back was straight and his uniform was impeccably clean. A handful of badges and awards exclusive to the Avatars of Myth adorned his chest.

Though he was currently the focus of the entire Larkinson Clan, Joshua no longer looked awkward after he reined in his nervousness.

As the impressive footage had showed, there was no reason for him to feel ashamed. Though he was still younger than every assembly member, he had already faced the sandmen and Fridaymen in battle! Compared to these formidable threats, facing the Larkinsons who exuded the same vibe as his Quint!

"Joshua King." Ves spoke in an officious tone. "Please kneel."

The mech pilot knelt in an instance. He adopted the stance of a soldier lowering himself before a king with only a single knee resting on the metal deck of the mech hangar. The entire setting was reminiscent of a knighting ceremony, especially since Ves and Gloriana resembled monarchs with how they sat on their thrones!

Ves rose from his seat and held the Larkinson Mandate prominently in his hand.

Every Larkinson expected him to enact a knighting ceremony of some sorts and add Joshua to the clan.

Though that was his intention, Ves had something different in mind. Doing everything by himself would only legitimize the accusation that he was turning into a tyrant!

Though Ves had already crossed a lot of lines, that made it all the more important to contrast it by involving another Larkinson!

"Who vouches for Joshua King!?"

A silence stretched until one female voice shouted out from the crowd.

"I do, patriarch!"

Ves immediately turned towards the speaker and smiled.

"Jannzi Larkinson! Please step forward!"

Everyone reacted with surprise as one of the Larkinson Clan's honorable expert candidates strode out of the same crowd of bystanders.

Though also young, Jannzi was a much more important member of the clan than even the assembly members! The Larkinsons always revered their expert pilots. Since Jannzi possessed the chance to become an expert pilot, no one treated her like a regular Larkinson!

Of course, she wasn't there yet. Despite her relatively high status, the clan didn't hand over any responsibilities to her. She wasn't a member of the Larkinson Assembly or Executive Council. She would only be eligible to become a member of the Larkinson Court after she completed her ascension.

Therefore, no one expected that Ves would call her forward at this instance. Ves himself recognized that it was rather inappropriate to call upon someone who should be investing all of her energy in reaching apotheosis!

He didn't care, though. He already broke plenty of taboos. What was the big deal about breaking another one?

For her part, Jannzi didn't show any dissatisfaction towards Ves' attempt to drag her in a political play. In fact, she smiled as she stood besides the kneeling mech pilot!

Days before, when Ves read the up-to-date record on Joshua, he noticed that the young kid started dating Jannzi of all people.

Ves immediately realized the value of this relationship! As long as most people weren't aware of the intimacy between the two mech pilots, he could readily abuse it for his own ends!

Though he was tempted to grin, he carefully schooled his expression and adopted a formal demeanor.

"Janzi Larkinson. As a fellow mech pilot and Avatar, you have shown your willingness to vouch for Joshua's entry into our clan. Tell me why you are willing to stand up for this mech pilot."

Jannzi stoically blinked before issuing her response.

"Mr. King is an excellent soldier and Avatar. He respects his superiors. He supports his colleagues. More importantly, he has dedicated his life to the clan. Our patriarch is right. Joshua is just as loyal and committed to our cause as our fellow relatives. I can trust him with my life, and that is enough."

Even though she didn't speak very much, her words still held a lot of weight. In a clan without any current expert pilots, the few expert candidates were the next best thing! It was not easy to challenge Jannzi's endorsement.

That said, Larkinsons were still capable of opposing expert pilots when it truly mattered. Ves had shown no hesitation in resisting Ghanso Larkinsons and plenty of other relatives stood by their principles even if the greatest members of the family disagreed!

However, those who spoke out against an expert pilot had to make a very deliberate choice. If they challenged an honored family member for a trivial reason, then they would definitely attract a lot of condemnation!

Ves took advantage of this custom by calling upon Jannzi to vouch for Joshua. He could have called up Commander Melkor instead. In fact, that would have been the most appropriate Larkinson to call upon considering that the Avatar Commander was Joshua's superior.

His endorsement wouldn't be as strong, though. Despite his higher rank, Melkor was still an ordinary member of the younger generation to the assembly members. It was a lot easier for them to ask their questions and voice their doubts to a regular Larkinson!

Ves made the right choice. Silence ensued after the mech pilot of the Shield of Samar spoke on behalf of Joshua. None of the assembly members were confident enough that they could challenge Jannzi's glowing praise.

From a political standpoint, it was unwise to show opposition to her. An expert candidate was a possible future expert pilot. What if she developed a grudge against the naysayer? What if she exerted her influence as an expert pilot to suppress the assembly member?

The risks were considerable. Certainly, the future direction of the Larkinson Clan and the Larkinson name were at stake. Yet the sheer momentum which Ves had shown since he spoke up seemed irresistible! To the assembly members, it was a lot easier to just go with the flow instead of acting as a contrarian!

Caratan Larkinson already showed what happened to those who tried to obstruct the proceedings! Though Caratan was supposedly a dissident who didn't belong in the assembly anymore, a lot of Larkinsons feared that they would receive the same treatment!

The combination of Joshua's stellar track record and the inviolable endorsement of an expert candidate was too much. There was no meaningful opposition to what was about to occur.

Just as planned.

Ves inwardly grinned as he rose from his throne and stretched out his hand yet again. The Larkinson Mandate floated from his grasp and soared gently over to the standing and kneeling mech pilots.

Eventually, the book landed in Jannzi's hands. The woman looked curiously at the book and its eye-catching medallion on its front. This close, she could feel the life it held.

"Please induct Mr. King into our clan." Ves instructed.

"I do not know the words."

"The phrasing isn't as important as the intent. Speak from your heart. The Larkinson Mandate will do the rest."

Though Jannzi was a bit perplexed, she adjusted her mood and turned towards Joshua.

Just like Ves, Jannzi wanted Joshua to become a member of the Larkinson Clan!

She took some inspiration from the rituals she went through when she joined the Apocalypse Heralds.

"Please place your hand on the book."

She lowered the book until the kneeling Joshua was able to obey her command.

"Please answer my questions."

The entire assembly theater grew silent. The air grew heavy as an unprecedented event took place!

To enhance the moment, the Golden Cat even modulated her glow. Every Larkinson felt more connected to each other than ever before!

"Will you shed your former loyalties and allegiances and forget your prior obligations?" Jannzi asked the kneeling mech pilot.

"I do."

"Will you take up the Larkinson name and honor its heritage and honor?"

"I do."

"Will you fight on behalf of the clan and swear to uphold its existence no matter the circumstances?"

"I do."

"Will you treat your fellow Larkinsons as kin and do your utmost to protect and nurture your fellow clan members?"

"I do!"

Jannzi took a deep breath. "Then rise, Joshua Larkinson!"

The latest member of the Larkinson Clan rose to his feet with incredible dignity! Everyone widened their eyes as their perception of Joshua had inexplicably shifted!

The glow that was responsible for their shared sense of belonging somehow included Joshua! The moment he rose to his feet, the Larkinson Mandate seemed to spike!

Only Ves witnessed the moment where the Golden Cat spontaneously formed a new bond with Joshua! His extraordinary mood which aligned so heavily with the Larkinsons made it very easy for the Golden Cat to establish this bond!

This was the final proof that Joshua had truly become a Larkinson!

### *Chapter 2018 Casting Votes*

The entry of Joshua into the ranks of the Larkinsons marked a seminal moment in the history of the Larkinson Clan.

For the first time in the existence of the entire Larkinson line, the clan members recognized an outsider as a fully-fledged Larkinson without any caveats!

Even though Joshua was already dating Jannzi and could have become a Larkinson through marriage, Ves had forestalled this slow and gradual process and turned him into a Larkinson right away!

Joshua was very happy about his elevation. For the first time in his life, he truly felt he belonged to the family and clan he admired from afar and up close! The last point of separation between him and the Larkinsons were no longer in place.

From now on, he would no longer go by Joshua King.

From now on, he was Joshua Larkinson, an upstanding member of the Larkinson Clan!

Aside from him, Jannzi cheered for him as well. Even if she wasn't dating, she still would have endorsed his entry into the clan. He had already shown many of the exemplary traits that matched the Larkinson ideals.

Of course, the biggest winner of all was Ves. He successfully manipulated the circumstances in his favor and utterly dominated the assembly session. Though his conduct was tyrannical, few assembly members spoke up against his intervention. Even if they still harbored misgivings with turning people like Joshua into genuine Larkinsons on the same level as them, they kept their words to themselves!

The atmosphere after Joshua's entry into the clan was so heavily slanted in favor of the current proceedings that it seemed that no one could stave off the inevitable!

Ves rode the momentum he created after enacting his plans to maximum effect. He knew that adopting Joshua alone was far from sufficient! Thousands more aspiring soldiers and workers were waiting to become a Larkinson, and Ves wanted to act quickly in order to secure their permanent loyalty!

There were several reasons why he wanted to move quickly.

First, the Larkinson Mandate and the Golden Cat already exposed the ability to detect traitors and threats to the clan. Therefore, the risks involved with adding so many outsiders was largely moot. At least the worst outcomes were off the table!

Second, as the principal supporter of full integration during the assembly meeting, Ves stood to gain an unimaginable amount of support and appreciation from all of those new Larkinsons! His clout and influence within the clan would surely remain strong and enduring considering that he had allowed so many people to become Larkinsons!

Third, Ves wanted to move their hearts proactively in order to secure their commitment and reduce the risks of defection or betrayal.

Though the Battle of Kesseling VIII had made a lot of his subordinates proud, the awful losses and the considerable disruption to their lives were still sources of discontent.

Over time, the various setbacks and tragedies might erode the pillars of his organizations!

Turning them into Larkinsons before reaching the Sentinel Kingdom was a crucial objective to Ves! The people who joined his organizations and gradually became indoctrinated by them were very valuable resources. It took years to turn them into his loyal subjects!

If the fleet reached the Sentinel Kingdom only for a quarter or a third of his workforce to submit their resignations, Ves and the clan would be severely hampered!

It wasn't easy at all to recruit a lot of new people. Their shaky loyalties and commitments could be the doom of his endeavors if they all decided to abandon their duties and run when they encountered a crisis!

Caratan Larkinson and his band of like-minded clansmen weren't the only people in the fleet who expressed a desire to leave.

While Ves disdained the people who had already taken an oath and joined the clan only to change their mind later on, he was not as harsh to those who were merely employees.

The level of commitment expected from the two were completely different! This was why he frequently worried about valuable talents such as Casella and Imon Ingvar quitting their jobs. There was no way that Ves could retain those who resigned in the proper fashion.

"My fellow Larkinsons." He spoke up again. "Let us wrap this assembly meeting, shall we? Joshua is but the first to join our clan! Speaker, please hold the vote."

Ovrin Larkinson threw a sharp look at Ves. The impatience shown by the clan patriarch was a strong hint that he wanted the votes to be cast quickly without any further room for debate!



Though the speaker felt disturbed by this conduct, he nonetheless proceeded as instructed because the outcome already seemed set in stone.

"The critical question in consideration is to decide whether to open up the opportunity to integrate outside people into our Larkinson Clan without any explicit tiers or classes.

The speaker briefly reiterated the main points of the proposal. Outsiders were allowed to join the clan, but it wasn't as simple as knocking on its doors and filling in a form.

Just like Joshua, they had to possess existing relations with the Larkinson Clan. Whether they were employed by the LMC or served in one of the mech forces, the applicants shouldn't consist of random people from the streets!

Secondly, the applicants wouldn't be able to gain entry into the clan without securing the endorsement of at least one upstanding member of the clan.

While Ves already trusted the Golden Cat to keep an eye out for any traitors and agitators, it was best to leave the matter of control to the Larkinsons themselves.

As a result, the proposal made the person who recommended or endorsed the applicant responsible for the deeds and misdeeds of the latter.

For example, if Joshua went crazy one day and killed a bunch of Larkinsons, Jannzi would bear the guilt of harming the clan by incautiously inviting a malignant element into the clan!

This was a common condition in many organizations. It was a simple but effective method to ensure the applicants were as well-behaved as possible as their referrers accepted nothing less!

The final matter that Ovrin explained was the conditions of leaving the clan.

"The rules for Larkinsons born or married into the clan remain unchanged." The speaker said. "Any existing Larkinson can apply to leave the clan without too much fuss. This is a tradition that has been set by the original Larkinson Family and has ensured its stability and cohesion for centuries."

He threw a glance to the joyful Joshua who had since returned to the crowd on the side. "The rules are different to those who have applied to join our clan. Once they swear the oath, their decision is permanent and irrevocable. Unlike the Larkinsons who had no choice which clan or family they belong to, those who proactively seek to become a member of our clan must abide by their decisions! We will NOT allow anyone who voluntarily joins our clan to reconsider their choice and leave!"

This was a small concession on the part of those who were worried the outsiders would be less-than-committed to their new clan. Treachery was a rather sensitive subject to Ves and the other Larkinsons and they did not wish to accept reluctant applicants!

Of course, every rule possessed exceptions. In extraordinary circumstances, it was still possible for Joshua to leave the clan. If he transgressed or pushed very hard to leave, Ves or the Larkinson Court could review his case. Exile was a common punishment in many family organizations, and it was something that the Larkinson Family frequently employed as well in the past.

Once Speaker Ovrin clarified the most important details, he proceeded with the vote.

"Those in favor of this proposal, please say aye!"

Over forty assembly members instantly rose to their feet! Barring a couple of odd exceptions, the Larkinsons all raised their hands and voiced their support!

"Aye!"

"Aye!"

"Aye!"

"Those who are against this proposal, please say nay!"

No one moved. No one talked. An awkward silence stretched as none of the people who disapproved dared to stick their heads out of the crowd!

Though Ves already identified and memorized the identities of the assembly members who refused to voice their support, he didn't do anything to break the illusion of neutrality.

He had already secured his goal and scored a very important policy victory. There was no need for him to be petty and go after the obstructionists.

Ovrin paused a little longer than he had to in the hopes that someone raised a principled objection, but alas, Ves had built up so much momentum that none of the original opponents of this proposal thought it was wise to stand in his way!

"Forty-one votes in favor, eight abstentions, and no votes cast in opposition. The ayes have it. The Larkinson Assembly formally adopts this proposal! From this day onwards, the Larkinson Clan will open its gates to any outsiders who aspire to become a Larkinson!" Speaker Ovrin announced!

A large round of applause emerged from a surprising direction!

While the assembly members were still trying to fathom the profound consequences of the passing of the proposal, the crew and soldiers of the Redfeather were not so burdened. Their jubilation towards this change inspired all of their hopes to follow in Joshua's footsteps!

Everyone who wasn't already a Larkinson eagerly longed to place their palms on the Larkinson Mandate and take the oath!

After the commotion subsided a bit, Speaker Ovrin formally ended the assembly session. The members slowly started to exit the assembly theater and spoke in low tones with each other as they started to board their rides back to their assigned ships.

Ves and Gloriana rose from their seats and collected their cats before heading to their own shuttle.

Along the way, Ves held Gloriana's hand and silently communicated with her through their implants.

"I didn't do it for you." He conveyed.

Gloriana's lips curled up into a sly smile. "Oh? Then should I instruct the guards to remain in our stateroom later tonight and guard us against any possible threats?"

"Umm.. you don't have to.. we're pretty safe, you know. In fact, those guards are completely redundant considering that Lucky and Clixie already serve as excellent protectors. Why not reassign those valuable guards elsewhere? I think the Scarlet's Rose engineering bay requires more protection considering its vital importance to the running of the fleet."

"Hihihi! Sure, Ves. You just want to reinforce a critical compartment. Your suggestion doesn't have anything to do with expending your excess energy, does it? Should I be prepared for an exhausting night?"

Fortunately, Gloriana didn't prolong his torment any further. She squeezed his hand. "I'm very proud of you, Ves. You did what was necessary despite your desire to be soft to your relatives. While I understand your sentiment towards your family, you are their leader now. You can't afford to be soft and let your clan spin out of control."

"I'm... not sure I'm okay with what I've done." He sighed. "One thing is for sure. At least some part of me has grown hard!"

"Oh, Ves! Stop being so silly, hihi!"

The two boarded their shuttle. The vehicle quickly departed the Redfeather and flew back to the Scarlet Rose.

As Ves and Gloriana continued to communicate with each other through their private channel, Gavin coughed and interrupted their play.

"What is it, Benny?"

"First of all, I'd like to thank you for working so hard to push through the proposal. On behalf of all of the people in the fleet, I thank you. Each of us hope to be accepted into the clan very soon."

Ves smirked. "You sure you think you can become a Larkinson?"

Gavin blinked. "I've been serving as your assistant for years! I even have a referrer ready to back me up! Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson has already agreed to vouch for me when I submit my application!"

"Ah, but are you loyal enough? Bennies like you aren't exactly known for that, and you have already transgressed once. Will my Larkinson Mandate even accept your oath?"

"Boss! That's not fair!"