

## Mech 2007

### *Chapter 2007 Unrecognized*

The discussion with the three Larkinson elders hardly resolved his doubts and uncertainty surrounding the imminent adoption of outsiders into the clan.

On one hand, Ves gladly welcomed the expansion of the clan as long as the original Larkinsons remained in control.

On the other hand, Ves did not want the clan to become too stratified and locked in class tension.

He knew from observing other family organizations that dividing family members into a group of core members and outer members happened very frequently.

Many families, clans, noble houses, dynasties and etcetera often faced a similar situation as the Larkinson Clan. Expanding their group often had to be done for one reason or another, but the persistent question remained. How much power did they need to give up to accept the outsiders into the clan?

When it came to these kinds of matters, self-interest often trumped fairness. Even if the outsiders had contributed far more to the group than the so-called insiders, they were still deprived of the rewards and recognition they deserved in order to preserve the interests of the latter!

This could become a very major fault line later on. A lot of families and clans went down because of the infighting and intrigue such divisions provoked.

Ves did not want to turn his clan into a group where one Larkinson wasn't able to trust another Larkinson. This kind of future was something unthinkable for the old Larkinson Family and he wasn't about to let his clan descend so easily!

After a lengthy and illuminating discussion with elders, Raymond said one last piece before departing from the Scarlet Rose.

"Whatever road we take, we best make our decision after considering all of the angles. The outcome of this serious question will determine what it truly means to be a Larkinson. Think carefully before you make your own choice, young Ves. Are Larkinsons only confined to those who possess the blood? Or is it possible that there are already a lot more Larkinsons among us, just waiting to be recognized?"

Obviously, Raymond still preferred to take the riskier but more rewarding choice of treating outsiders as equal.

When the three old fogeys left, Ves lingered in his office. He tapped his fingers against his desk as Lucky playfully swiped them with his paw.

"Meow."

"Are you feeling lonely?"

"Meow!"

"Is Clixie not enough for you?"

"Meow meow!"

"You want to become in charge of an entire posse? I don't know about that. I don't want to turn the Scarlet Rose into a cat zoo!"

"Meeeeeoow."

"Hmm, maybe you have a point. There's not enough life on this ship."

As the former mobile supply frigate of the CRC, the ship wasn't all that big to begin with. Due to his paranoia, he only stationed his most loyal Avatars and Battle Criers as her crew. While they were very dedicated to their jobs, they were always serious on duty and off duty.

The design teams and Larkinson seeds residing on his ship possessed a lot more personality, but as current and future mech designers, they always recognized the vast gap between their employer and themselves.

"I'm a bit too isolated here." He muttered. "I'm cut-off from the rest of my fleet. I don't even know how others are doing."

He supposed he could patch into the monitoring system feeds to observe what was happening on the other ships, but that sounded a bit too lazy and detached for him. Since the fleet required half a day to cycle the FTL drives of its slower ships, why not take advantage of this window of opportunity to tour his sprawling organization.

After he made his decision, he broke the news to Gavin, who blinked at the sudden initiative.

"That's rather unexpected of you, boss." He replied, though he made sure to tap into his data pad to ready a shuttle and accompanying escorts. "You have two big mech design projects in the pipeline. Is this really the time to go on a tour?"

"It'll only be half a day. I've never really taken stock of my people after we fled Kesseling VIII. We've been running from the Fridaymen for so long that it was as if they were right

on our heels. Now that we have the Penitent Sisters to guard us, the crisis isn't so severe anymore."

His personnel quickly readied an armored shuttle for departure. After sending a note to Gloriana that he wouldn't be attending today's design session, he took Lucky and Nitaa and started his short tour.

Surprisingly, Ves didn't opt to drop by the Redfeather or any other ship in his possession.

Instead, his first stop was the Serendipity. Venerable Brutus Wodin perplexingly welcomed his arrival at the hangar bay of light frigate.

"Welcome to my personal ship, Mr. Larkinson." The expert pilot said with reserve. "I have some very nice bottles of authentic Hexer vintages waiting to be opened up. Would you like to peruse my collection?"

Ves waved his hand. "No thanks. I'd like to take a look at your Star Dancer instead. I've never seen a second-class expert mech up close."

"My mech is right ahead. Please be mindful that we can't allow you to peek too much. The mech is built using some of the best technology the Hegemony has mastered. While Gloriana is permitted to know the technical details, you are not on the list."

"Understandable. I just want to take a look to appreciate the craftsmanship of your mech."

They walked a few bays over until they reached the Star Dancer. Just as he expected, the expert mech was fully ready to deploy if needed.

"Impressive." Ves sighed in admiration. "This is perhaps the most powerful ranged mech that I have ever personally laid eyes upon. Its craftsmanship is exquisite."

The expert mech was everything he expected and more. Though he had reviewed the battle footage of the Star Dancer in action against the CRC's Screaming Blade, seeing the mech up close was an entirely different experience.

Though dormant, the mech carried the spiritual flavor of its mech pilot. Even now, Brutus' strange protective field merged seamlessly with the mech, making it appear as if they were connected despite the latter's dormancy.

The blue-and-black mech looked a bit different from the last time he had seen it. Ves noted keenly that it exhibited a bit less armor and a few more modules that looked like boosters and other mobility-related enhancements.

"Looks like you've prepared your mech for a rematch against the Screaming Blade."

The expert pilot crossed his arms as he stood next to Ves. "Dueling a light mech is not something that I enjoy. I fight best when I can take my enemies out before they reach my position, but that isn't always possible. Mobility is one of my mech's strong suits, but against the Screaming Blade, I was barely hanging on in the last battle. If that mech ever shows up again, My Star Dancer has to be even faster because my enemy will certainly have prepared for me as well."

This sounded like an interesting dynamic to Ves. Instances where enemy expert pilots frequently clashed against each other happened all the time in the Bright-Vesia Wars. Just like the mech games, the mech pilots constantly tried to adjust their mechs and battle tactics to counter their enemy and avoid being countered in the next clash.

"Before you became an expert pilot, did you follow the trajectory of other male mech pilots in the Hegemony?"

Brutus shook his head. "I'm a Wodin. With my impeccable training and excellent results, my dynasty has always set higher expectations upon me. Don't mistake me as the other boys who serve in our armed forces."

"You're a boy yourself, you know." Ves pointed out.

"I am."

"Doesn't that bother you? I've seen how boys are treated in the Hex Army. The women who are in charge never allow boys like you explore their full potential."

"Control is necessary, Ves." Brutus replied without emotion. "There are good reasons to impose these conditions on boys."

"They don't seem to apply to you anymore."

"That's because I'm an expert pilot."

"Does that make a difference? You're still a boy."

He shook his head. "Becoming an expert pilot in the Hegemony is a blessing, not a curse. To become a demigod as certain people call expert pilots is a blessing. My state has no cause to doubt that I am anything but a loyal Hexer! It is because of this trust that I am allowed to pilot the powerful and dangerous Star Dancer!"

The Hegemony would be fools if it didn't thoroughly vet Brutus before allowing him to pilot an expert mech. His loyal outlook and his Wodin upbringing probably reassured the female Hexers that he wouldn't abuse his power.

"What about the other boys who aren't lucky to advance to expert pilot? Are you okay with how they are being treated?"

"We follow the natural order, Ves." The expert pilot sternly replied. "Just because I haven't said anything about how your Avatars of Myth and other mech forces treat boys the same as women doesn't mean I think they are fine. They are not. Everytime I am confronted by such ignorance, I feel uncomfortable."

"They haven't exhibited any problems!"

"So far."

"I think my Avatars, Sentinels and Battle Criers will surprise you. What you fear will not take place, because you know why? Just like every other mech force in the galaxy, the gender of their officers and commanders is not a factor!"

Neither of them were able to sway the other's opinion. Ves felt frustrated by Brutus' idiotic adherence to the fallacies of Hexer ideology, but the expert pilot had grown up with it for his entire life. It was a bit too much to ask a Hexer, an expert pilot no less, to alter his entire mindset!

After a bit of chatting, Ves finally broached the last subject.

"I don't know if you haven't heard, but it is possible that my Larkinson Clan will welcome a lot of new additions. Do you have any opinions you'd like to voice?"

"We Wodins won't be a part of your clan." He immediately said. "At the very least, Ranya and I will still hang on to our Wodin names. As for Gloriana..."

"She's already a part of the clan. She's in our member rolls."

Brutus shook his head. "The Hegemony and the Wodin Dynasty doesn't recognize your laws. As far as my mother is concerned, your clan's laws and customs don't have any weight."

That sounded swell. Ves frowned at the obvious disregard to his clan.

"I hope that will change one day." He responded in a diplomatic fashion. "Our Larkinson Clan may not seem like much to you Wodins, but I hope that Gloriana and I can work to change your impression."

"I don't mean to disparage your efforts, Ves. My sister is quite enthused about the future prospects of your clan. The point I'm trying to make is that your clan is not really significant on its own. The only reason to take note of it at all is because of you. Without your presence, your Larkinson Clan wouldn't even register in my mother's mind!"

That was very much true. Though Brutus didn't mince any words, Ves recognized the implicit warning in his tone. Right now, the Larkinson Clan was hardly a player, let alone a recognized entity!

Anyone could start a clan. However, it took genuine effort to earn everyone's recognition. Right now, his Larkinson Clan lacked too many achievements. Its fame was virtually nil and even its victory against the CRC wasn't enough to skyrocket its reputation.

Ves realized that the Larkinson Clan shouldn't keep looking inwards. Just like himself, the clan needed to build up its reputation in order to earn society's recognition! Only through becoming a known entity would his clan gain true legitimacy!

"Thank you for your opinions. I've gained a lot from our talk."

"You're welcome, Ves." Brutus nodded. "Don't get me wrong. Your Larkinsons and your people are a fine bunch. I truly admire the soldier tradition of your old family. I hope you can perpetuate this focus on service. Discipline and control is the foundation of a well-run organization!"

Ves chuckled. "You're only saying that because you want to steer my clan closer to how Hexers run their organizations."

"It's irresponsible to let boys run wild. If you don't want to shackle them completely, then at least attach some cuffs to them. We Wodins will feel much more reassured if your clan is bound by rules."

"We Larkinsons will run our clan in our own fashion, thank you very much." Ves dryly replied.

Ves would never make a decision to alter his clan just to earn the approval of Hexers!

#### *Chapter 2008 Nascent Brotherhood*

After departing from the Serendipity, he visited the Redfeather next. While the nominal Avatar flagship failed to demonstrate the splendor of his elite mech force, it wasn't as if Ves possessed anything better.

The Scarlet Rose and the Barracuda were the only two ships that were a class above the rest, but their paltry capacity and different roles made them unsuitable to serve as the mobile headquarters of the Avatars.

"I'll get you something better when I'm ready to form my expeditionary fleet." Ves promised Commander Melkor when they met at the ship's mech bay. "For now, this is not a good time to buy a ship. The entire starship market in the Komodo Star Sector is still clogged with orders."

"I know." His cousin answered. "I don't expect you to address this issue immediately, but it would be good to have a plan in place. We can't keep entrusting the safety of our

mechs, mech pilots and support personnel with a ship as flimsy as an economy mech. Light carriers are like eggs. It only takes a small crack to spill out all of the insides!"

Obviously, this issue was bothering Melkor and everyone else a lot more than Ves. This was not a surprise considering that Ves usually resided aboard the Scarlet Rose. Even if she wasn't designed for frontline combat, the ship's excellent armor allowed her to withstand a decent amount of attacks from second-class mechs, which provided Ves with a lot more reassurance than others!

"Seriously, Ves. Please get us better ships." Melkor pleaded. "They don't have to be as good as the ones operated by the Penitent Sisters, but at least give us a chance."

"I know, I know. I didn't come and visit the Redfeather to hear these familiar complaints. Please show me around. Let me take a look at your mechs first."

"Right. There are Bright Warriors all around us. We have taken good care of them. While they are a bit more complicated than the mechs our crews used to service, I think we have all gotten a good handle over them in the last month."

The Bright Warriors were unmistakable presences in the mech bays and other areas of the ship. Ves was very familiar with their glows considering they originated from the Golden Cat.

What he found interesting was that the X-Factor of the individual Bright Warrior mechs were already starting to form their own individual identities.

Though it was imperceptable to everyone else, Ves keenly noted that they were becoming more unique due to the history they accrued, the influence of their mech pilots and the role they adopted the most.

Originally, the Bright Warrior was supposed to be a modular mech platform, but cost and resource constraints limited each copy to a single configuration.

The Illuminating Warrior, Shining Warrior, Nova Warrior and Solar Warrior were all developing their own distinct sub-identities.

Ves wondered how far their evolution would go and if the mechs were able to retain their distinctiveness if the Avatars ever changed their configuration.

"The mech technicians have taken good care of them. I hardly recognize any problems when it comes to their maintenance."

"That's mostly thanks to you. You've provided us with extensive documentation in the form of manuals, warnings, advice and breakdowns to us. Reportedly, our chief technicians are very thankful for all of the information you've given out. It has made their lives much easier."



Ves smiled. "I understand the difficulties of servicing complicated mechs. I've been in their shoes before, so I know exactly what they need to do their jobs better."

Personally, he refused to tolerate any sloppiness when it came to the care and maintenance of his mechs. This was not just because of his design philosophy, but also because it made too much sense.

Sure, it cost a lot of time, effort, money and resources to keep the mechs at their best conditions, but all of the preventative maintenance would pay off down the line when their parts began to show their age.

He didn't spend too much time to inspect every mech. While Ves was inordinately proud of his Bright Warrior design, he didn't start this tour to admire his own work.

"I've seen enough. Please introduce me to some of your people. I'm curious to see how they are faring in my fleet."

"Of course. Let's head to engineering first and the bridge afterwards."

The chief engineer and the captain were both Brighters, but they were exceptions rather than the rule.

"The Redfeather has more Brighters than any other ship because she's our flagship." Melkor explained during their tour. "Many of our other ships are predominantly crewed by Ylvainans because we don't have any other choice."

"Are there any problems with regards to their loyalty or culture?"

Melkor shook his head. "Nah. Even the Ylvainans on this ship are very well-behaved. They are still unsettling to us, if you know what I mean, but I can't ask for better subordinates. It's just..."

"They've become a lot more weirder now that they switched from worshipping Prophet Ylvaine to worshipping me, right?"

"You know how that looks to us Brighters."

"Let me reassure you that I have nothing to do with that. I don't even know what the cultists are doing either, to be honest. It's only because I have guaranteed their expression up to a certain limit that I haven't cracked down on the practice. As long as what they are doing is harmless, it's better to leave them to their own devices."

Though Melkor looked like he didn't entirely agree, he refrained from speaking any further. The Avatar Commander adjusted the visor on his head before leading him forward.



"You wanted to see some of our mech pilots, right? Let me bring you to our training hall."

They visited a compartment that was centered around simulator pods and theoretical mech piloting classes. Various veterans from the Larkinson Clan were diligently teaching or drilling the Avatar pilots.

Though the entry of Ves and the Avatar Commander elicited a lot of commotion, the officers and instructors quickly forced the mech pilots to return to their lessons or drills!

While it was unfortunate that his presence altered the routine of the Avatar pilots, Ves wanted to take a close and personal look at their lives.

For the first few minutes, he refrained from approaching any one of them. Instead, he idly chatted with Melkor while he leveraged his newest abilities. He formed a spiritual ear and started to extend it towards his men when they thought that Ves wasn't paying attention to their quiet banter.

"Ves Larkinson is here." A young Avatar hissed to her squadmate. "Just look at him! He's a lot more impressive in the flesh!"

Her squadmate frowned. "Pipe down. I don't want to get into trouble."

"We might all become Larkinsons soon. Don't you think that's exciting? We'll all be part of one big clan!"

"I'm not so sure about that. There's probably a catch somewhere. It sounds too good to be true."

As Ves kept eavesdropping on the conversations, he discovered that everyone was looking forward to the prospect of becoming a part of his clan! Hardly anyone thought differently, but that made sense since they were all Avatars.

As his most loyal and elite mech troop, the Avatars were some of his most ardent supporters!

After he had his fill with eavesdropping on his men, he decided to interact with them more directly. Melkor guided him to a group of Avatar who had just finished their latest class on spaceborn mech combat tactics.

"Sir!"

The Avatars all stood at attention while saluting Ves with military precision!

Ves noted that they weren't just saluting him because they were instructed to do so whenever he was present. He sensed a lot of energy and enthusiasm in their demeanors. They were genuinely glad to meet with their ultimate employer!

One Larkinson happened to be present in the group. "Chette Larkinson, how are you doing?"

"I'm fine, sir." Chette respectfully replied.

That didn't sound like much. Ves was aware that his presence was stifling the young Larkinson mech pilot, but there wasn't much he could do about it aside from asking further questions.

"Have you achieved any results in your training?"

"I have been making substantial progress towards developing my proficiencies with second-class mechs, sir. We all have. The Bright Warriors that you've provided to us has helped immensely, though it's a pity that I'm not able to access the Selzer."

It was too difficult to arrange everyone suitable practice time with the four second-class mechs Ves had obtained when he captured the Scarlet Rose. Most of the time, the fleet was traveling in FTL, which made live practices impossible.

"You're a rifleman mech pilot, right? Have you received a lot of help from Venerable Brutus?"

Chette adopted an admiring expression. "While I haven't been able to receive a lot of help from him, the tips and insights he passed on to me has been very helpful in polishing my marksmanship! Every ranged mech pilot in the fleet is very happy to have him with us. Some of us have improved by leaps and bounds while the rest always gained at least something from his personalized lessons."

That sounded very promising. The presence of even a single expert pilot was enough to comprehensively elevate the skill level of an entire outfit!

"What do you think about inducting your fellow Avatars into the clan."

"I love it, sir. I trust my buddies with my life."

Chette truly meant it. Ves sensed no duplicity or calculation at all in his words. He simply stated his opinion in the most emphatic manner possible to convey his own feelings on the matter.

"Not every outsider is the same."

His cousin shrugged. "I think we can handle it. We're Larkinsons, right? I think we're strong enough to handle all of the newcomers. There are too many people among us who are like brothers and sisters."

As Ves asked the other Avatars to voice their opinions, they all seemed to be of the same mind. Melkor had managed to foster a strong bond of brotherhood among the soldiers. They all treated each other as closely as the Vandals used to treat each other.

In fact, there were even signs that the Avatars were moving closer to the level of the Swordmaidens in terms of cohesion! Right now, his elite mech force still had to flesh out its martial tradition in order to reach this enviable level, but the potential was definitely present!

Ves ended his tour on the Redfeather shortly afterwards. As much as he wanted to interact with the Avatars some more, he had to take a look at the other groups as well. The Avatars only represented a small slice of his total workforce.

Before he left, he made one last stop to the compartment where the Quint was stored. The masterwork mech looked as impressive as ever. Melkor had made sure to assign his best mech technicians to keep it in excellent condition.

Joshua King lingered very close to his mech. When Ves and Melkor approached, the young mech pilot immediately saluted.

"Sir!"

"Is the Quint up to your satisfaction?"

"It is more than I ever wish for! Piloting this mech is a delight!"

Ves asked the same questions he posed to other Avatars. Predictably, Joshua was a huge supporter of the initiative to expand the Larkinson Clan. In fact, he was a lot more outspoken than the other Avatars!

"Mr. Larkinson, I have admired your work and your family for years." Joshua said.

"Being chosen to pilot your Quint was the best day of my life! I have made a promise to myself that I would serve you and your clan in any way possible."

"Are you that eager to join my clan?"

"It is an immense honor to become a part of your clan. I am willing to sign any contract imaginable and swear as many oaths as needed to become a Larkinson!"

"What if you have to sign a contract that would make it very difficult for you to leave?"

"I've already made up my mind! Becoming a Larkinson is worth everything!"