

Mech 2011

Chapter 2011 Quality of Blood

Ves finished his tour shortly after he visited the Ingvar siblings.

Overall, he was very satisfied with what he had seen and heard. Touring a portion of his fleet not only allowed him to get a pulse on his subordinates, but also reaffirm his existence. Many of them hadn't seen Ves in person for a long time. In fact, a lot of Ylvainans and other people never even met him in person in the first place!

Even though his visit was a trivial matter to him, it mattered a lot to the people who professed their loyalty to him and the clan. Ves enjoyed a lot of regard among the workers. It was surprising how much of an effect a short personal appearance had made to his popularity.

When the shuttle flew back to the Scarlet Rose, Gavin approached and asked him a question.

"Have you learned what you set out to know?"

"I think so." Ves nodded while stroking Lucky's back. His cat comfortably perched on his lap. "Before I went on this tour, I didn't really possess a clear impression of what my non-Larkinson subordinates thought. Their loyalty, their dedication, their aspirations and their enthusiasm were a complete mystery to me. I could only guess at their commitment to the Larkinson Clan."

"What about now?"

"The results are better than I expected. My fears are unwarranted. While I'm aware that everyone behaves self-consciously in my presence, I am pleasantly surprised by how eager and willing even the most ordinary workers want to become a Larkinson."

"That shouldn't have come as a surprise, boss."

Ves sent a sharp look at his assistant. "I recognize that joining the Larkinson Clan is a huge step up for ordinary people. I'm not surprised that many people want to join my clan for that reason. What I was unsure about was the extent to which they are willing to mold themselves into Larkinson. What if they want to achieve the opposite and corrupt my clan from the inside? The Ylvainans are especially a matter of concern."

"The True Believers subverted your expectations though, right?"

"They're still cultists, don't get me wrong." Ves gruffed. "Even though they started worshipping me directly, their beliefs and traditions are still alien to secularists like us. However, I'm encouraged by their willingness to adapt to our customs. While it is too

much to ask for them to drop their superstitions, at the very least they seem very deferential and respectful to the values of our clan."

Along the way, he encountered various groups of Ylvainans. Ves thought that the followers of the Living Prophet would be rabidly inflexible and touchy about their beliefs, but they proved to be pleasant if somewhat disturbing to be around.

Their friendly demeanor and extreme loyalty to him meant that they might just be able to fit in the Larkinson Clan!

Though they would definitely form their own clique if they joined, the Ylvainans also set a very great example in terms of loyalty and dedication. Ves would doubtlessly be able to count on their support for the times to come!

"The reason why I went on this tour was to make up my mind on how to integrate outsiders into the clan. Will I feel reassured letting outsiders become fully-fledged Larkinsons right away? What if I feel more relieved by instituting a class system that slows down the integration process? I've been dancing on the knife's edge all this while. Only now am I sure of my decision."

To be sure, Ves still held a lot of doubts, but that was nothing strange to him. Every risk he took came with dangers. At some point, he needed to pull the trigger and commit to a choice. No matter what might result in the event of failure, he would not regret the choice he made at the time!

Gavin gulped and watched Ves carefully. "What is your verdict?"

"I'm.. fully behind a complete integration." He declared. "While it isn't a mistake to institute a class system or some other way to favor trueblood Larkinsons over adopted Larkinsons, I don't think that is the direction we should be heading towards. Family matters. I think if we give outsiders the opportunity to become family, they won't disappoint us. Their dedication towards the Larkinson cause is quite strong!"

If that weren't so, Ves would never be in favor of this choice!

"Does that mean that I can become a relative of yours as well?" Gavin hopefully asked.

"Don't exaggerate." Ves replied flatly. "You may become a clansman, but don't think that every Larkinson shares a close relationship with other Larkinsons. I am not delusional enough to make such a demand. It is enough for every Larkinson to feel like they belong in a single group. I also think that this is necessary to form the strongest, most cohesive group of people that is ready to challenge the Red Ocean!"

Almost everything he was doing at this time was to further his grand expedition. Aware of some of the immense challenges he might face in the alien galaxy, Ves not only needed stronger ships and mechs, but also a loyal and dedicated workforce!

Once everyone became a Larkinson, it was much harder for third-parties to pry them apart! Ves wouldn't have to worry so much about internal schisms like the one that plagued the original Larkinson Family!

Of course, Ves happened to be the chief culprit behind that event, but that wasn't important.

Though Ves had made up his mind, that didn't mean he would get his way.

"A majority of other Larkinsons don't agree with your choice." Gavin remarked. "The Larkinson Assembly will likely go for a class system if the latest rumors are true."

"I'm aware. The other Larkinsons are entitled to their opinions. I don't begrudge them for trying to preserve what they think the Larkinson name stands for. To them, they are used to how we used to be back in the Bright Republic."

"Do you think that's wrong?"

"It isn't a matter of right or wrong. I can understand the attitude of treating our Larkinson name as something that should only belong to the truebloods. However, blood isn't everything. I've met too many outsiders today who embody the Larkinson ideals just as well as my relatives. Would it be fair to deprive them of the same status that is owed to Larkinsons who just happened to possess the right blood? I don't think so. People like Joshua deserve to become a Larkinson if he wants it so badly. He more than earned his right to be regarded as family in my eyes!"

Though Gavin looked happy at his change of heart, he still played the dutiful role of Devil's advocate.

Neither mentioned the irony of using this term to describe his current actions.

"I don't mean to rain on your parade, but you never prioritized fairness. Your fellow Larkinsons are no different. This argument won't be enough to convince your relatives to change their minds."

That was true. Ves was quite selfish, and while the Larkinsons always tried to maintain a good reputation, they weren't exactly known for their generosity.

Sure, they cared a lot about their fellow family members, but they never extended their intimacy towards others who didn't share the same name.

When it came down to it, Ves had to present an argument that appealed to their own interests instead of leaning to abstract ideals such as fairness.

The problem was that Ves couldn't come up with a compelling reason that met this condition.

He furrowed his brows. "Hmm. It will be very difficult to convince my fellow clansmen to support my choice when there is a very strong argument that complete integration will likely dilute their power and influence. They may even see it as the first step of the collapse of our clan!"

Certainly, their fears were legitimate. There was no way to tell if the clan would be able to last or retain its original values after absorbing so many outsiders without any barriers.

Perhaps Ves needed to come up with a compromise solution that lessened the objection.

He didn't want to, though. For something as important like this, half-measures would only exacerbate the tensions between the two groups. Holding back would just hamper the integration process.

At the end, he wanted the division between trueblood Larkinsons and adopted Larkinsons to disappear.

His new view was that everyone could become a Larkinson no matter what quality of blood they possessed! To Ves, it didn't matter anymore whether any clansman inherited the genes of the original Larkinson ancestor! There were plenty of bastards among the Larkinsons who possessed the same bloodline as him, so it wasn't the only determinant of someone's commitment to the clan!

"You'll be redefining what it means to be a Larkinson. Are you truly capable of selling this change to your skeptical relatives?"

"Hmm.." Ves rubbed his smooth-shaven chin in thought. "This is a very difficult matter. I have some ideas on how to approach this problem, but nothing too certain. I'll have to talk to Calabast and James and think over it. They're the most ardent proponents of this change. They should have a better idea on how to sell our views."

In the end, Ves threw in his support behind the two troublesome figures. He didn't particularly like either of them, but that didn't mean he would fall in line with them if it was in his best interest to do so. He would be shooting himself in the foot if he let his personal feelings get in the way of his interests!

"What am I thinking?" He suddenly frowned.

He felt as if he was becoming more and more like Senator Tovar and other so-called 'wise leaders'! Attitudes like this was exactly what led to the betrayals he suffered!

The leaders of the Bright Republic sold the Larkinsons out to the Friday Coalition. The leaders of the three dynasties of the Ylvaine Protectorate stabbed their own Bright

Martyr in the back to preserve their state. Would Ves be following in their footsteps by taking up a decision that went against the interests of his relatives?

Ves felt more and more troubled by the implications. His principles, emotions and logic warred within him. He grew more uncertain on the correct course of action.

Too much was at stake for him to feel conflicted.

His thoughts remained turbulent by the time his shuttle reached the Scarlet Rose. As Ves exited the vehicle, he returned to his stateroom and tried to sort out his thoughts.

The Larkinson Assembly would be holding a vote in a matter of days. Ves not only needed to clear his doubts, but also present a strong argument that would sway the assembly members to his side!

"Why did I share so much power with the Larkinson Assembly?" He groaned. "Maybe I shouldn't have been so generous in splitting my authority."

As clan leader, he could still ram through his own edicts, but that was a very quick way to disillusion the original clansmen!

"Is Gloriana right?" He gradually wondered. "Will it be necessary for me to employ my Devil Tongue against my own relatives?"

His principles warred against this decision. He knew how much damage he could do when he combined his fiery words with his spiritual tricks.

"Enemies and allies, are they truly the same?"

Before he could muse any further, the hatch to the stateroom slid open.

"Ves! You're finally back!"

Gloriana walked over and swept him in a loving hug, cloistering him with her lavender scent! She rubbed his cheek against his own. "So soft! So smooth! Hihih!"

"Ah, hello Gloriana. How was your day at the design lab?"

She withdrew from the hug. "It's not the same without you. I hope you can settle the matter of your Larkinson Clan quickly. Have you made up your mind?"

"I did."

"Then that's great! I hope you get your way, then. Let me explain what progress we made on the two projects."

She sat down next to him and enthusiastically showed off her progress.

Chapter 2012 Assembly Session

The fateful day had arrived. When the fleet arrived in the next star system, a large number of shuttles emerged from various ships. They all converged on the Redfeather, which had converted a portion of her mech hangar into an improvised semi-circular theater.

Originally, the Larkinson Assembly wasn't supposed to convene in person. Due to various reasons, it was safer and more convenient to hold this assembly session in a virtual assembly hall.

Ves disrupted that original plan. He pushed for an in-person session, arguing that a decision as important and impactful as this shouldn't be decided in a detached, virtual setting!

The questions of whether to integrate outsiders into the Larkinson Clan and how far this integration should go were too important to be decided with so much physical separation!

In truth, Ves did not particularly object to a virtual assembly session. He only wanted to drag every Larkinson assembly member in the same chamber because his persuasion worked best if he could spiritually influence his audience up close!

He still hadn't made up his mind whether he should make full use of his Devil Tongue during this assembly session. Many times, he felt tempted to fall back to a more benign form of persuasion, just like he did when he addressed the fall of Bentheim.

Whenever he thought back on that moment, he felt proud for dragging his relative out of their slump. Along with breaking the news that DIVA managed to rescue the Larkinsons captured by the Bright Republic, his clan quickly went back on track with hardly any dips in productivity!

"That was then. This is now." He whispered to himself.

The issue that Ves was contemplating not only hit much closer to home to many Larkinsons, but also touched on their most closely-held values!

To them, family was always confined to their own blood relatives! The only ones who were exempted from this rule were those who directly married into the family. There were no other exceptions!

"Honorary Larkinsons don't exist to my family."

This approach served the original Larkinson Family well back when it was based in the Bright Republic, but Ves believed it was outdated.

Now that the Larkinson Clan sought to find a future by roaming the stars, Ves wanted to redefine what it meant to be a Larkinson!

As he rode on his shuttle, Gloriana, their cats and Gavin kept him company.

All of them provided some useful input on what he should pay attention to when he held his speech.

"Emphasize that we are all in it together." Gloriana mentioned. "Everyone who joins your fleet shares all of its wealth and woes."

"Miaow."

"See? Even Clixie agrees!"

"That's not what she's saying. I think she needs a litter box."

"Oh."

When Clixie departed to the restroom of the shuttle, Gavin filled up the void.

"The Larkinson Assembly currently consists of fifty assemblymen. We've investigated their stances and determined that roughly thirty-nine of them are leaning against full integration."

"That much, Benny?"

"Of the eleven that remain, I don't think there are any of them that are strongly enthusiastic towards accepting outsiders as Larkinsons without any divisions."

"Great."

"It gets worse, boss. Of the thirty-nine naysayers, a few of them consist of Larkinsons who have already made up their minds to leave the clan to join the Larkinson Family instead."

"What?!" Ves sat upright in his chair! "Since they're already turning their backs on the clan, they should be kicked from the Larkinson Assembly!"

Gavin shrugged. "With how the rules of the Assembly are currently set up, that's not entirely possible."

"Maybe we should kick them right now!"

"I won't advise that, Ves. Regardless of how much you are annoyed at them, many Larkinsons still consider them family. They deserve to have a say in the time they are still in the clan."

"Do they really believe that?!"

"Hey, it's your family. You know your own folk best."

His assistant was right. This was exactly what he could foresee the Larkinsons doing!

The problem was that Ves was pretty sure the potential leavers all sided with the Larkinsons who wanted to maintain a fence between the truebloods and the adopted!

Even if they didn't want anything to do with the clan anymore, they were still invested in their Larkinson identities. Naturally, they would do everything in their power to make sure the Larkinson Clan did not dilute the identity of their common name!

While Ves grumbled at this setback, the shuttle soon arrived at its destination. A lot of shuttles tried to ferry their passengers over the Redfeather, but one of the perks of being the clan patriarch was that his ride possessed priority!

Once the shuttle landed, Ves and the rest had to exit quickly in order to make way for the next shuttle. They quickly strode forward and made their way to the middle where a large space in the mech hangar had been cleared for an imposing construction.

Modeled after a semicircular amphitheater, the mech technicians had done a good job at erecting a venue where his upcoming speech would have the greatest effect!

Though there were better places for the Larkinson Assembly to hold its pivotal session, Ves insisted on holding it in the mech hangar of the flagship of the Avatars of Myth.

In his previous tour, he was impressed by how strong and pervasive the glows of the Bright Warriors affected the entire surroundings.

Some of those mechs had been moved elsewhere to make room, but over a dozen Bright Warriors still remained in the vicinity to cast the entire compartment with an aura that was uniquely Larkinson.

All of this setup served a purpose. Ves had used all of his power to manipulate the environment in his favor.

Even now, Ves noticed many assembly members adopting a more solemn and reserved demeanor. In the presence of so many Bright Warriors, this was no time to joke around!

Ovrin Larkinson, in his guise as the speaker, approached Ves in a formal-looking robe. "This is a big day, today. The clan will change forever regardless of what transpires here. I hope that whatever we decide upon will make us stronger."

"Those are my hopes as well." Ves nodded, aware that Ovrin was one of the Larkinsons who was leaning against full integration. "At least some Larkinsons will depart from this ship with less-than-happy expressions. I just hope that they won't take their defeat too personally."

"When it comes to family, everything is personal, Ves. We can't separate sentiment from our decision-making. Not in this instance."

That was true. After a cordial chat with the brother of his grandfather, Ves moved on and approached Commander Melkor.

Though he was also a Larkinson and held an important position, Melkor wasn't a part of the assembly. He was merely milling around in order to chat with some of the Larkinsons who came in person.

"Melkor." Ves greeted. "How is the Redfeather?"

"Everything is as secure as possible. All of the mechs remaining in the hangar are active but locked down. There is a strong escort of Avatars patrolling around the ship. Everything is as safe as can be. My men are all on high alert."

"What do you think of the likely outcome of this session?"

Melkor's mouth curled into a frown. "With how the wind is blowing, my men deserve better. Almost all of them have risked their lives for us in some way. That is far more than what you can expect from mercenaries or regular employees. To me, they're already family."

"I don't disagree. Perhaps there will be a way to avoid this outcome."

Melkor immediately scanned Ves from top to bottom with his visor. Ves was aware of his cousin's action because his comm and his implant detected the scanning waves passing through his body, though they failed to penetrate the bits covered by Synthra Umbra.

"You're up to something again, aren't you? I know you too well, Ves. Whenever you say something like that, you always pull off some sort of stunt. Public speeches like the ones you are about to hold is one of your favorite moments to sway people's opinions!"

Ves held up his hands. "Hey, hey, I haven't done anything yet! Please withhold your judgement until this is over."

The Avatar Commander snorted. "I'll transfer some more Avatars over to the Redfeather in case we need the help."

What a wonderful vote of confidence.

Some time went by until every shuttle deposited an assembly member. The old and distinguished Larkinsons who obtained the honor of representing the clan all took their seats. Though the amphitheater-like construction was an unusual place to hold the session, it wasn't too different from the old steering committee meetings.

Everyone took their places. Ves and Gloriana sat at the throne-like seats elevated above the deck facing the half-circle. Ovrin sat a bit lower and to the front.

He struck the gavel. The amplified sound rang throughout the entire mech hangar, causing everyone to fall silent.

"I declare the commencement of the latest session of the Larkinson Assembly!" The old Larkinson announced with an officious tone. "Today, there is only one topic on the agenda."

While Ovrin went through all of the formalities, Ves tried to gauge the overall mood of the assembly members.

Though they all looked similar to the naked eye, Ves perceived a lot of variety in their emotions. It was easy to guess which Larkinsons wanted to carve out a special status for the truebloods.

Depressingly, the estimate that Gavin had given him wasn't too far from the truth.

The session proceeded until a Larkinson elder finally had the opportunity to address the Assembly.

"Fellow Larkinsons," Caratan Larkinson began. "We all know what the Larkinson Clan needs. Our numbers are low and allies are hard to find. The proposal to add new members to the clan is an understandable one in the circumstances."

Ves quietly snorted. Caratan Larkinson was one of the ringleaders of the clansmen who were planning to defect to Ark Larkinson. For someone who wanted to jump over to the Larkinson Family to talk as if he cared about the clan was a giant farce!

Still, as long as he hadn't actually left, he still possessed the right to attend the assembly session!

Caratan continued his speech. "However, in our enthusiasm to strengthen our clan, I would like to caution you all to please exercise restraint! While it is fine to change the definition of the clan to accommodate our changing circumstances, it is a mistake to go

too far! Many family organizations have made a distinction between trueblood members and adopted members. In our star sector, the Gauge Dynasty is the most prominent example! Though it is huge in terms of membership, only a small percentage of them consists of those descended from the founders of the dynasty! Nonetheless, it has emerged as the most powerful partner of the Coalition!"

Ves frowned at the use of the Gauge Dynasty as an example. He held a personal animosity towards it due to Lady Curver's actions!

A lot of other Larkinsons reacted negatively to the example as well, but they couldn't help but admit that Caratan was right to refer to the Gauge Dynasty as a successful example!

"No matter what you think about the Gauge Dynasty, its success is undeniable. I think we should all draw upon its example and use its promotion system as a powerful way to manage our new clansmen!"

A lot of Larkinsons had already been inclined towards this solution. Their determination to vote in favor of this model only rose after Caratan had his say.

Several other assembly members got their turn as well. Various supporters of full integration had their say as well, but none of them were as convincing as Caratan Larkinson.

It was too difficult to assure the assembly members that everything would go right if they went for the more radical option.

Ves quietly groaned and palmed his face as he sank into his throne.

"Looks like it all rests on my shoulders."