

Mech 2013

Chapter 2013 A Greater Calling

A couple of ships emerged in a sand-scoured star system of the Reinald Republic. Different from Ves and the Larkinson Clan, the remnants of the Larkinson Family traveled aboard weaker vessels.

In its entire existence, the Larkinson Family never operated any starships at all until recently. Before the rise of Ves and the influx of excess cash, the family always depended on relying on commercial services or renting starships in order to move its larger assets.

That was in the past. Now that the Bright Republic turned against the old family, the stricken family members were forced to do everything possible to get their hands on some ships and mechs.

Fortunately, the family was not without friends nor resources. Though the government confiscated their domestic assets, the family still invested lots of excess money in a number of foreign accounts.

That may not be enough to buy ships and mechs, but that was where their stellar reputation came in. When the Larkinsons called for help, a surprising amount of sympathetic Brighters donated their aid!

There were many Brighters who were fed up with the current direction of the Bright Republic or thought it had no future anymore even before Bentheim succumbed to the sandmen.

A lot of veteran mech pilots turned mercenary and other folk still remembered what it was like to serve alongside a Larkinson. many former Havensworth division soldiers also looked up to their former commanding officer!

With Ark Larkinson taking charge, the Larkinson Family received aid from all corners. Though the contributions were fairly minor and sporadic, collectively they amounted to a considerable amount of help!

A fleet had formed around the old family. Though it wasn't too impressive, it was strong enough to defend itself.

Piloted by veteran Larkinsons as well as defectors and mercenaries that had joined the family in their escape from the Bright Republic, the mechs didn't look impressive but exhibited military coordination.

Even though the fleet was still vulnerable to determined raids and major attacks, not a single pirate group dared to test the Larkinson Family's patience!

Not only was there very little to be gained by attacking a fleet that carried no valuable cargo, a famed expert pilot also presided over it! No one was crazy enough to challenge an expert pilot except for other state actors!

The Gracious Indigo was the current flagship of the Larkinson Family's fleet. Though she was old and fairly worn, she was still quite serviceable, having served as the mobile headquarters of a mercenary corps before finally passing on to the Larkinsons through unclear means.

Inside an office compartment, Ark Larkinson sat behind his desk reviewing the balance sheet of the family.

Though the family wasn't in danger of running out of cash, the Bright Republic's appropriation of all of its domestic accounts caused a lot of disruption.

Most of the money it accumulated was gone! The family put too many eggs in one basket!

The evaporation of so much money was yet another reason for the old family to resent Ves Larkinson and his penchant for provoking the Friday Coalition.

If not for this wayward descendant, the Larkinson Family would have never been entangled in so much trouble!

Now that the Larkinson Family was suddenly left to fend by itself without the support of a state, Ark Larkinson tried his best to keep the pieces together.

He kept frowning as he studied the accounts. While there was enough money to eke out a stable existence, it was not enough to elevate the old family.

His terminal suddenly sounded a chime. Ark immediately accepted the request.

The projection of Benjamin Larkinson appeared. Though he looked old and exhausted, the current crisis ignited his willpower, causing his former expert pilot tendencies to reemerge!

"Son."

"Father."

"I'm sure you know what is taking place in the clan right now." Benjamin slowly spoke. "Ves and his band are contemplating yet another radical initiative."

"I understand the position of the clan. The decision to adopt external people into their clan is not as crazy as it sounds. These are new and unprecedented times. We may need to change as well if we want our family to remain intact."

"I understand. I already have a lot of ideas, but you have the final say. Everyone in the family trusts you, Ark. I have no doubt that you will exercise your authority wisely given your leadership of Havensworth, but I hope that you can steer us to a solution that will give most of us some peace of mind."

Ark grimaced. "That's easier said than done. For obvious reasons, the Komodo Star Sector is becoming increasingly less attractive to us. More and more, I am beginning to contemplate whether we should move to Vicious Mountain or Majestic Teal."

Neither star sectors were ideal. They had their own way of doing things that didn't entirely mesh with the noble ideals of the old family. It wasn't easy to find a state that was similar to the Bright Republic!

"Majestic Teal has fewer wars, but it is full of hypocrites." Benjamin dismissively shook his head. "The peace they enjoy is very false. Millions or billions of subjects die each year due to the machinations of their avaricious leaders. None of them possess any true honor. The only ones who do well in Majestic Teal are those who excel in plotting and intrigue. Let's face it. We do not excel in this area. Considering our inclinations, we would do much better in Vicious Mountain."

That said, neither Benjamin nor Ark held a good opinion about Vicious Mountain.

Though it honored mech pilots and especially high-ranked mech pilots to an extreme degree, putting glory hounds in charge of states came with its own problems!

Compared to Majestic Teal, Vicious Mountain and especially the Garlen Empire was refreshingly blunt and honest. Its leaders fought and started wars whenever it wanted to without bothering to come up with a plausible casus belli.

Though Ark predicted that the Larkinson Family could do well in Vicious Mountain, he feared the influence of its glory-obsessed martial culture!

"We may need to look further ahead." Ark said in resignation. "Luckily, human space has a lot of star sectors. There should be at least one place in the galaxy that meets our needs. We just have to spend enough time to find our new home."

"Will our funding be able to sustain so much travel?" Benjamin asked. "Crossing star sectors is an expensive endeavor and the distances are unimaginable to us. In fact, many of us have never even left the Bright Republic! This flight is the first time that many of us have left our familiar state, and that frightens us more than we would like to admit!"

As a leader who always tried to be in tune with his subordinates, Ark completely concurred with his father. "We are all out of our comfort zone. That is not in question. I believe we are capable enough to overcome our problems. We have gone through worse. We WILL find a home!"

He briefly exuded the willpower and determination of a potent expert pilot when he spoke those words. It was as if he was making a promise as well as a declaration!

Though Benjamin and Ark were on different fleets separated by light-years away, the older of the two was still sharp enough to notice something distinct about Ark's mannerisms.

His eyes widened. "My son.. you've changed. Am I mistaken, or are you..."

"It's strange." Ark ruefully smiled as he eased his shoulders. "I fought through two of the Bright-Vesia Wars. In my first time in battle, I had to fill the shoes of a leader because too many soldiers looked up to me due to the failings of our commanding officers. Back then, I didn't know why I earned so much respect among the men. Even though I lived through that harrowing war and broke through, I still didn't entirely understand the burden of leadership. I was merely acting according to my instincts and what you and many other Larkinsons instilled in me. That was enough for me to become a mech colonel, but no further."

"What has changed?"

"This." Ark waved his hand around his desk. The scattered data pads and other items made it clear that he had been working very hard the last few weeks! "Even though I spent years as a senior officer in the Mech Corps, I was always operating under the auspices of high command. If you disregard my rank, I was merely a cog in a machine. I may have been a very shiny and impressive-looking cog, but I had no control over my motions."

He lowered his head and looked at his hands. "It started with the Sand War. The exceptional circumstances and the dire threat of the sandmen to human life started to evoke something in me. Resisting the alien threat is very different from fighting rival humans from another state. There is no question which is the greater calling. Fending off sandman fleets, saving entire planets of humans from extermination and trying my best to keep all of my soldiers alive at the end of the day was very taxing, but also very rewarding."

"You still served at the whims of high command and the government." Benjamin noted.

"That is true. Though the Sand War is over now, I am thrust in a smaller but even more critical situation to me. I am tasked with steering the future of the Larkinson Family. Despite the smaller scale, I feel more burdened with responsibility than ever! Back when I was in the Mech Corps, I was surrounded by subordinates and superiors who were able to make up for my mistakes. While there are plenty of wise Larkinsons in my fleet, I seem to be the only one who possessed the strength and leadership acumen to lead our family."

"And that makes you afraid, am I correct?" Benjamin smiled through the projection. "Many people believe that expert pilots don't feel fear. They are wrong. An expert pilot's fear of failure is much greater than that of normal people! The greater your fear, the greater your drive to succeed!"

Ark nodded. "It's strange. In my decades-long service in the Mech Corps, I experienced numerous battles where my life hung on a thread. I navigated through constant engagements where I had to lead my soldiers through near-defeats. Yet even if I am no longer leading thousands of troops, I feel more burdened than ever because my own family is at stake. At the same time, I'm no longer weighed down by the politics and constraints of our former state. No one is there to dictate orders to me or take responsibility. The buck stops with me, and that is much more frightening than I realized."

The fate of so many people he cared about rested on his shoulders. Whereas others might have succumbed to the burden, Ark accepted this greater calling. His will to preserve and save his family stimulated him in a way he had never experienced in his long years of service!

Both father and son shared a meaningful look with each other. There was no need to voice what Ark was going through. As one former expert pilot to a current expert pilot, both of them were keenly aware what was happening with the latter.

Ark Larkinson was beginning to progress to a higher state!

Though it was far from sure whether Ark would be able to advance to ace pilot, once he did, the fortunes of the family would completely change! The value of an ace pilot was a lot different than that of an expert pilot! As long as his loyalties weren't tied to an existing power, many second-rate states would be willing to open their doors to a homeless ace pilot! The Larkinson Family would easily be able to find the home and stability it so desperately sought!

"Good luck, my son."

"It is not luck I need, but support." Ark steeled his eyes! "As long as my relatives continue to believe in me, I shall never let them down! That is my calling!"

Chapter 2014 A Good Leader

Aboard the Redfeather, The Larkinson Assembly had convened in person to make one of the most pivotal decisions of the Larkinson Clan!

Fifty elders who shared the same blood exchanged their views.

Ves was disappointed with the debate raging through the assembly theater. Though the assembly members sometimes raised their tones, there were remarkably few Larkinsons who supported extending greater rights to the soon-to-be-clansmen.

Instead, the overall discussion descended into nitpicking as various Larkinsons proposed various schemes and amendments to best integrate outsiders while keeping them at arm's length!

"Two tiers are not sufficient!" An old Larkinson shouted. "We need at least ten tiers! We have to provide incentives to the adopted Larkinsons in order to make sure they have something to work towards! We can't give them a dead end once they join our clan or else they'll sit back and mooch off our existing gains!"

"Ten?! Are you out of your mind? We might as well shout in front of their faces that we never intend to turn them into complete Larkinsons! This is not a game where we can expect our adopted kin to diligently work to promote themselves into higher-classed Larkinsons! Don't you have some decency!?"

"I disagree! I think this is an excellent idea! Granted, ten tiers sound excessive. How about five tiers? We need to give our new brethren some hope that they are able to reach our height within their lifetimes!"

Ves palmed his face as the Larkinson elders became completely consumed by the discussion on how to erect a means to put up more and more barriers between trueblood Larkinsons and adopted Larkinsons.

The greater the distance, the more Ves felt the clan was moving in a direction that wasn't to his liking!

Certainly, hierarchy was important. Any large organizations needed people at the top and bottom to function properly.

Even if Ves declined to intervene and let the current consensus go into law, the Larkinson Clan wouldn't instantly decline.

The supporters for limited integration weren't incompetent, nor ignorant. They had already rolled out several clever-sounding plans and frameworks to manage the clan's transition to a greater entity where the peripheral members served the core members in exchange for gaining benefits from the clan organization.

If everyone supported the consensus and tried their best to implement it properly, the Larkinson Clan could grow strong in the future.

Yet was such an organization truly what he sought?

No.

Ves wanted the clan to maintain its emphasis on fellowship. Every Larkinson had to be able to lean on another Larkinson. That had always been his ideal. Separating Larkinsons by their bloodline and their 'tier' didn't sound bad, but it was the underlying intent that troubled his sensibilities.

The trueblood Larkinsons were trying to do their best to deprive the adopted Larkinsons from getting their full due. Ves had a sense that if he didn't stop the current proceedings, his clan would forever be locked in an invisible struggle between trueblood and adopted Larkinsons!

This kind of internal tension displeased Ves immensely. While he valued his bloodline and heritage as much as any Larkinson, he increasingly accepted the notion that obsessing over blood purity was too insular of an approach!

The competition in the Red Ocean didn't care about the differences between trueblood Larkinsons and adopted Larkinsons. Ves anticipated that his Larkinson Clan would experience unimaginable challenges in this new region of space.

In light of the future, Ves wanted his clan to be as internally strong as possible! In his heart, he wanted to trust everyone who bore the Larkinson name regardless of their origins.

Right now, there were too few trueblood Larkinsons for Ves to depend upon. Instead, he was much more reliant on the loyalty and dedication of the Brighters, Ylvainans and other people that made up his current fleet!

Considering that Ves and the Larkinson Clan would not be able to attain any of their ambitious goals without the assistance of so many people, it made a lot more sense to secure their loyalty in the strongest fashion possible! The earlier, the better!

Unfortunately, no one else in the assembly thought so. They would all dismiss his opinion as a reckless extreme if he tried to explain himself.

As the debate was slowing down, Gloriana reached out her arm and grabbed his hand.

The two formed a hardline connection with their implants.

"It looks like the Larkinson Assembly won't support your vision." She began.

"I know."

"Why don't you step in, then? It will be too late to insert your voice if you delay any further."

"I.." He hesitated. "I have a plan, but.. I'm not sure whether it is the right thing to impose my views onto my clan. My relatives deserve to have their voices heard."

His girlfriend shifted her head in his direction. Her face exhibited mild contempt. "No offense, Ves, but you are much greater than the squabbling old men who have never run anything on the scale of your clan. Don't you see how limited their visions are compared to yours? If not for you, none of them would ever contemplate that they would be able to travel to the Red Ocean!"

"What's your point, Gloriana?"

"Take charge, Ves. You can't delegate your way out of everything. At some point, avoiding responsibility means abdicating responsibility. This is a slow means of losing control!"

"Is control even that important?" Ves hit back at her through their internal channel. "I am a mech designer. Designing mechs is what I do best. Sure, I took up leadership positions to expand my mech company and help my family, but it is all so I can design mechs with ease. Chasing power for its own sake has never been my goal!"

"Hahaha! What a funny joke. No mech designer can do everything alone. Designing mechs is an expensive and time-consuming endeavor, and it only gets worse the further up we go. Every successful Senior and Master have grown to become leaders of their own networks and organizations because all of this support is essential to sustain their growing research, financial and industrial needs!"

Ves knew this, but a part of him was reluctant to see his clan as a provider of loyal manpower to his organizations. There was something distinctly heartless and utilitarian about that perspective that clashed with his values as a Larkinson!

"What is in it for you?" He asked back. "Why are you so adamant in urging me to steer the clan in a different direction?"

"I'm a part of the clan as well, remember? No matter what my dynasty says, I signed the Larkinson Mandate during its founding, so that makes me as much of a clan member as you! I have a stake in these proceedings as well!"

"I don't understand why you don't want us to adopt a class system." Ves furrowed his brows in confusion. "Do you want to make it easier for Hexers to gain influence in the clan or something?"

She shook her head. "It's not about that! I never told you this, but the Wodin Dynasty also adopted a tiered system of sorts. While I'm lucky enough to be part of one of the main branches, people like Ranya received less opportunities because she's from a side branch. My dynasty isn't really pleasant if you look at it from the outside."

"I see." Ves understood her concerns. "I don't know, Gloriana. It isn't right to override their voices."

"This isn't about what's right, but what's necessary. Feeling good about yourself isn't going to save you when you will pay for letting the clan run itself into the ground! Just look at the people who you entrust with responsibility! Do any of them inspire trust in you? I sure don't see anything worthwhile! There are too many boys in the assembly!"

"What does that have to do with this problem?!"

Gloriana ignored his inquiry. "I've seen you struggle and change your mind several times over the course of the last few days. Time is running out, Ves. I know it's not what you wanted to do, but a good leader is someone who is cruel enough to make the necessary choice instead of the right choice!"

It wasn't as if Ves hadn't adopted this approach before. In fact, there were way too many times where he briefly set aside his principles and morals to make the necessary choices. This was often the case when his own interests were on the line.

Yet.. when it came to his own clan, his own family.. could Ves really bring himself to go this far? He already felt a little remorseful for fracturing the original Larkinson Family.

In his perspective, that had been a necessary choice at the time, but that didn't make it okay.

As his conscience warred against his desires, Gloriana's face turned sly.

"If you score a victory today, I'll dismiss the guards tonight. We'll have our stateroom all to ourselves, hihi! I'll even convince Lucky and Clixie to play elsewhere for a while!"

Ves suddenly turned to her in shock! "Are you serious?!"

"Of course I am! I'm always in the mood when something great happens! A great man like you deserves a reward. Just think about it. Didn't you enjoy your first time? The eagerness you showed back then is something that I'll never forget! Won't it be great if we could relive that night? We could also do more if you want!"

He frowned. "Do you think I make my decisions based on my libido? I'm not that kind of person!"

"Oh, Ves, I don't mean it that way." She smiled. "Just consider it a cherry on top, a bonus to look forward to. You don't want to return to the Scarlet Rose in defeat, don't you? You'll never get me in the mood that way. Now stop stalling. Do what is necessary and make the clan follow your lead! Will you be a good leader or will you be a strong leader?"

Good leaders never got anywhere. Ves tried that already and only received betrayal in return. Not only his allies, but also his own family stabbed him in the back because they thought they could get away with their actions!

Perhaps Gloriana was right. Perhaps Ves needed to show some spine and throw his weight around. He didn't set up the position of clan patriarch to serve as a symbolic figurehead!

He drew his hand away from hers while adopting a stern expression. He grabbed hold of the Larkinson Mandate floating besides his throne and drew on its strength!

"Golden Cat, please support me and lend me your strength!" He mentally pleaded with the young spirit.

Nyaaaa?

She looked hesitant in meeting his request. As a spiritual entity that was in tune with every Larkinson, she was much more sympathetic towards the consensus of the majority! Right now, that meant she was loathe to interfere in the current assembly session!

However.. While she had been set up to represent the greater will of the Larkinson Clan, she was still a young and naive entity! Ves was like a father to her considering that he literally created her into existence!

Private sentiment warred against public interest. The latter soon lost out. In the end, Goldie was far more affectionate towards Ves than the entire clan.

This wasn't surprising to Ves. It was something he consciously and unconsciously willed into her spiritual makeup!

Nyaaa!

With Goldie's consent, Ves began to draw upon her spiritual energy, suffusing his body with a glow that was identical from the ones radiated by the Bright Warriors surrounding the assembly theater!

"Larkinsons!" He shouted, rudely interrupting the current discussion on some proposed amendment. "We have debated enough about one option, but there is also another choice we can make!"

Every Larkinson fell silent. The sheer pressure exuded by the clan patriarch wasn't stifling, but there was something about it that compelled every Larkinson to shut up and listen!