

## Mech 2021

### *Chapter 2021 Surge of Optimism*

As the Larkinson Clan experienced massive changes, the fleet eventually crossed through abandoned and distressed space and reached the territory of the Sentinel Kingdom!

Everyone's nerves truly relaxed at that time. Though the Penitent Sisters already provided them with a huge amount of security, the CRC could always spring a huge surprise on them while the fleet was still within its reach!

Entering the Sentinel Kingdom definitively closed this door. Though the Sentinel Kingdom didn't exhibit a strong bias towards women, it existed firmly in the sphere of the Hegemony. If the CRC dared to invade so far into Hegemony-aligned space, its forces would never make it out alive!

During this time, Ves slowly put his mind off all of the changes in the clan in order to direct his attention towards his design projects.

Gloriana demanded his full commitment to the striker mech project and the Hexer mech project!

"You're such a worrywart, Ves." She crossed her arms and tapped her feet. "Just let the Executive Council and the Larkinson Assembly do their jobs. That's what they are for, right?"

"I'm the clan patriarch. It's my duty to keep abreast of the developments."

"If there are any issues the council and the assembly can't handle, they'll bring them to your attention. That hasn't happened lately, right?"

Ves reluctantly nodded. To be honest, the council and the assembly mostly presented their solutions to him as a courtesy.

"I suppose you're right. I don't need to spend all of my time worrying about every single detail. I'll try and invest my attention to our mech projects."

His mechs deserved all of the love and attention he could provide. As a mech designer, it was a sin to hold back when he could have put more effort in his designs!

It was fine for his mech designs to exhibit shortcomings due to his lack of skill and ability.

What his professionalism couldn't tolerate was a mech design that failed due a lack of effort or investment on his part! Such sloppiness was completely preventable as long as he did his due diligence!

Once he let go of some of the current issues, his productivity went back to normal. While their third-class striker mech project didn't exhibit any significant changes, his increased energy made a substantial difference in the development of their Hexer mech!

Although it was just supposed to be a landbound knight mech at its base, the added functionality that Ves insisted upon produced a lot of technical challenges.

The mech not only had to accommodate a lot of energy cells, but also had to fit in an entire suite of energy transfer systems!

Ves listed the main requirements. "We need a system to regulate the energy cells. We need a system to safely and quickly transfer energy from our knight mech to another mech. We need a system to siphon energy from fallen friendly and enemy mechs. Oh, we also need a system to keep it all together and prevent energy from spilling into places where they aren't supposed to go! Have I missed anything?"

"Don't forget about the heat management systems." Gloriana reminded him. "All of those energy transfers will encounter various amounts of electrical resistance. Though the use of superconductors mitigate a lot of possible heat generation, not every process can be achieved with them. Aside from the limited total energy capacity, the heat management system will likely be the second weakness of our design!"

His girlfriend was right. Their knight mech had to devote too much of its capacity to the energy transfer systems. Even if second-class mechs could fit in a lot more modules, they didn't have the budget or spare capacity to do more than stuff a bunch of heat sinks inside their mech.

This was a distinctly limited solution that put a finite limit on the operation time of their mech.

In theory, their Hexer knight mech could remain online indefinitely on the battlefield as long as it kept siphoning energy from various sources.

In reality, other limitations would probably force the mech to leave the battle. Pilot exhaustion, heat build-up, battle damage and other stresses all made sure the mech wouldn't be able to last more than a day on the frontlines!

"That's fine." Ves largely dismissed her concerns. "The point of my mech is to support the female Hexer mechs in their assaults or risky maneuvers by providing its shield, bringing along its glow and putting its energy reserves at their disposal. It's not necessary for the limitations of our mech to surpass the limitations of the Hexer mechs."

In the end, their product was a knight mech with a support function. Its offensive ability was completely garbage, and neither Ves nor Gloriana did anything to address this shortcoming.

For one, Gloriana and the Hexers were fixated on the idea that male mechs had to possess as little teeth as possible!

While this rule was rather difficult to apply to rifleman mechs, when it came to defensive mechs, the male mech pilots better not have the ability to overpower a female mech!

As for Ves, he went along with this custom because he simply couldn't find any capacity to strengthen his mech's combat potential.

That said, he didn't entirely resign himself to designing a toothless mech.

"Siphoning energy can also be an attack if it is applied to an active hostile mech!"

Ves didn't share this opinion with Gloriana. He did his best to keep it in his mind and out of his implant. If his girlfriend ever thought that he wanted to turn his mech into a bona-fide energy vampire, she would probably erupt in front of his face again!

That was not a pleasant experience!

In order to turn this mode of attack into reality, he spent an inordinate amount of time refining the energy siphoning systems. After trying out various ways to add this system onto the mech in a way that made sense, he eventually settled on adding additional limbs to the Hexer mech.

"The arms of our mech are already needed to hold the sword and tower shield." He explained as he projected a sketch of his proposed solution. "The energy transfer and siphoning systems need a way to reach out and establish a connection with other machines. It's impractical to expect our knight mech to drop its sword or shield in the middle of a battle in order to reach out its hand to a friendly mech."

To solve this problem, Ves attached an extra pair of specialized 'arms' on the mech's lower back. It made the humanoid mech look a bit like an insect. The extra limbs were longer in order to facilitate their reach but thinner because they weren't designed to hold any objects.

Sharp, needle-like implements that were geared towards connecting to energy ports or piercing through softer armor formed their tips. All in all, the mech looked a lot more menacing with the addition of these inhuman limbs!

Gloriana studied his sketch and frowned. "This isn't what we planned."

"I know, but how else will you solve this problem? Adding extra limbs is the most convenient solution. I know the Good Boy transfers its energy in a different fashion, but that mech is not expected to fight or do anything else with its arms! In order to allow our Hexer mech to operate on the frontlines, we have to ensure its ability to defend itself no matter the circumstances!"

In the end, Ves had his way when Gloriana failed to offer a better solution.

Though the extra limbs added to their workload, Ves began to enjoy this project more and more. While it was still a mech that treated its male mech pilots as support personnel, he hoped that at least a couple of them would discover and utilize the offensive possibilities that the energy siphoning limbs enabled!

Ves didn't dare to do much more than that. He was already fortunate that Gloriana was too taken in by her biases to realize that this new change could make the mech more dangerous!

All in all, while there were still a couple of months of development to go, the progress they made so far made both mech designers very content!

Of particular note was the increased performance of their design teams. After Ves personally inducted the Tovars, the Ylvainans and the two oddballs into the clan, they began to perform their duties with a lot more fervor than before!

Their high morale not only increased their results, but also accelerated their progression!

One major reason for that was that Ves no longer saw his subordinate mech designers as employees.

They were Larkinsons now.

Sure, they still retained a part of their old identities through their compound names. However, their addition to the Larkinson Network meant that Ves was much more certain about their loyalty and commitment to his endeavors!

For this reason, he began to devote a little more attention to his lessons. His earnest guidance allowed his assistants to avoid several pitfalls in their development, thereby speeding up the growth of their design philosophies!

A couple of individuals achieved a lot more progress than he anticipated.

Miles Tovar-Larkinson began to exhibit a greater degree of spiritual strength! Each time Ves peeked into the new clanman's mind, he noticed that Miles' spiritual potential began to grow and show more activity!

This was a rather fascinating process! Ves didn't have much experience in observing the transition of Apprentices to Journeymen. He could only base his theories around his own transition, but he had no clue whether other mech designers followed the same steps!

His curiosity drove him to pour more attention onto Miles. If the Apprentice was still an employee, then Ves would be much more reluctant to provide so much help.

Who knew if Miles Tovar would leave the LMC as soon as he advanced to Journeyman!

Yet now was different. Miles Tovar was different from Miles Tovar-Larkinson. The former was an employee while the latter was an employee as well as family!

Since the adopted members of the clan weren't allowed to undo their joining unless something exceptional happened, Ves could trust Miles to stay for the long haul!

Elevating one of his assistant mech designers to Journeyman therefore posed much less of a risk than before. In fact, adding another Journeyman to his roster would do much to strengthen the clan and increase the design capability of his mech company!

That said, it would still take a fairly long time for Miles to actually complete the transition and form his design seed.

"You have a lot of potential, Miles." Ves mentioned. "You have prior design experience and you have done a lot to shore up your knowledge in the past few months."

"Thank you, sir. I feel really great. Joining the clan was one of the best moments of my life!"

Miles had many reasons to smile. While he had to make his separation from the Tovar Family permanent, he was very much aware how lucky he was to receive so much personal attention from a talented mech designer!

"There's one problem that is slowing you down, though."

"What is it, sir?"

"You haven't been designing any mechs for a while, right?"

"I.. don't have the time. I started up a few projects, but the work that we're expected to do is consuming all of my attention."

Ves grimaced. That was partially his fault. "While I still require your assistance, I think it's time for you to cut back."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm freeing up some time in your schedule so that you can resume the development of your personal mech designs."

Miles looked surprised. Ves was never known to be generous in this fashion! This was a completely uncharacteristic decision from a notorious workaholic!

"Why?"

Ves couldn't tell the truth, so he resorted to a lie. "I see a part of myself in you. There is a drive within you that wants to explode, right? I think it would do you a lot of good if you unleash that drive onto your own mech designs instead of our current projects. Just try it out and see if you can progress your design philosophy. As my aerial mech specialist, I'll be leaning on you whenever we are tasked with designing mechs of this nature!"

"I'll do my best, sir!"

### *Chapter 2022 Hopeful Progress*

The Larkinson Clan fled the Kesseling System in defeat. Dozens of Larkinsons lost their lives in the desperate attempt to defend their fellow family from the aggression of a foreign state with a vendetta against their clan leader.

The clan members left the Ylvaine Protectorate with seething fury and overwhelming grief. Many began to doubt their choice of joining the Larkinson Clan as opposed to remaining in the Larkinson Family.

The large but haphazard fleet of light carriers, transport ships and civilian ships moved to the Hegemony side of the star sector in low spirits. The enterprise that Ves dreamt of erecting within a decade rested on shaky ground as criticism unceasingly circulated among the ranks of Larkinsons.

Months later, the fleet that closed in on the Cinach System looked completely different. Not only did it enjoy the escort of a formidable force of Penitent Sisters, its ships had also transformed in appearance!

A lot of mechs and vessels sported brand-new coating. The Scarlet Rose, the Barracuda and the other vessels of the Larkinson Clan boasted a geometric pattern of red and white.

The ships of the Avatars of Myth adopted the same scheme but with bright yellow as their primary color. Their mechs continued to stand out with their golden coating.

The Living Sentinels adopted the same as its sister troop but with grey and silver as their primary colors.

The vessels dedicated to the LMC stood out with their sky blue colors with an added touch of stylistic clouds decorating their surface.

The ships of the Black Cats, which included the Swordmaidens, stood out from the rest of the clan with their predominant black-and-grey coating. It was as if they were screaming to the galaxy how shady they were and how much they wanted to hide!

Aside from some discordant elements such as the Glory Battalion and the Penitent Sisters, the ships and mechs of the Larkinson Clan clearly looked as if they operated under the same banner!

If their coordinated appearances failed to impress on observers that they shared a common identity, then the emblems affixed to their sides certainly made that clear!

Aside from the individual logos of the various organizations, the most prominent symbol adorning every ship barring Calabast's spy organization was the emblem of the Golden Cat!

Due to the choices that Ves had made during the founding of the clan, every clansman began to wear the emblem that was shaped like the visage of a cat in gold with pride! That same pride extended to their ships where the emblem of the Golden Cat served as a prominent brand of their allegiance!

Ves had much to be glad about. During the couple of months after their haphazard flight from their former base operations, the Larkinson Clan not only regained its optimism, but also ballooned in size and strength!

He smiled as he lovingly held the Larkinson Mandate in his grasp. Whenever he physically held the book, he gained a very good view on the spiritual network. With the clan surpassing 10,000 members, the spiritual network had expanded in scope and strength!

"Meow."

Lucky playfully floated around the book while licking at the Golden Cat who seemed to be brimming with energy these days!

Nyaaaaa...

Though the recent growth had been very beneficial to the Golden Cat's rate of growth, there were lots of signs that she was having difficulty handling the strain!

She spent most of her time dozing off these days as she began to master new techniques to handle the added burden and responsibilities. Taught by Qilanxo and formed from her instincts, her new techniques allowed her to split herself up and expand



her awareness, thereby transcending her existence from an individual to something akin to an unconscious collective!

Ves found her transformation to be very fascinating. He studied her evolution frequently and observed all of the changes up close.

It was like witnessing the evolution of a god.

The profound changes altered her state of mind. While she was still a young and naive spiritual cat at heart, she also contained an unimaginable repository of collective wisdom! This larger gestalt served as a series of parallel processors that allowed the Golden Cat to maintain her full attention in multiple places with ease!

Anywhere her spiritual influence managed to reach, she could instantly pay attention to what was going on in the vicinity!

An important detail here was that her influence not only encompassed the living Larkinson clansmen, but also the inanimate objects that carried her glow!

So far, that only amounted to the Bright Warriors and the Larkinson Mandate, but Ves hoped to imbue her glow in more objects in the future so that Goldie would essentially be able to act as the clan's omnipotent monitoring system!

"What are you grinning about?" Gloriana asked.

Ves snapped out of his musing. He was currently taking a small break from a taxing design session at the design lab.

"I was just thinking how far we have come since we departed the Kesseling System. We successfully managed to reverse the downward trend of our clan and grow to a level of strength that we could scarcely imagine a month ago! Just look at the optimism brimming from every new clan member!"

Their assistant mech designers were all smiles these days as they wore their brand-new sky-blue and white uniforms. The emblem of the Golden Cat adorning their backs all conveyed a sense of shared identity.

Ever since they swore their oaths and connected to the spiritual network, the tension between the first design team and second design team lessened.

Despite their diverse origins, the mech designers no longer got hung up as much about their different origins and backgrounds. Regardless if they used to be Brighters and Ylvainans, they shared a lot more in common now than before!

While the secularists and faithful among the design teams still harbored many disagreements, they also regarded each other as brothers and sisters. The sense of



fellowship swelling in the LMC's Design Department also took place on many other ships!

Even Gloriana, who still insisted on maintaining both her old and new identities, enjoyed the optimism brimming throughout the fleet! She picked up Clixie and hugged her cat in an outburst of joy!

"Miaow!"

She had good reasons to be happy. Their progress on their mech projects was on schedule. While they hadn't implemented any remarkable innovations, they developed many smaller but ingenious solutions to their new mech designs.

The difference in skill and mastery was very evident when they compared their current level of ability with the level they used to hold before they designed the Bright Warrior.

The gains they made when they designed the modular mech platform and created their first collaborative masterwork mech had finally come to fruition! Just the increase in their mech affinities alone had done much to increase their intuition towards mechs!

If there was one issue which Ves wasn't pleased about, it was that he failed to divert enough time to explore his side projects.

While the striker mech project didn't pose too many problems, the Hexer mech project was a constant source of setbacks and delays!

The energy vampire concept that Ves insisted upon was very hard to implement, particularly when he wanted to hide its offensive utility from his girlfriend!

Trying to stuff this secret functionality into his mech design demanded an enormous amount of time and effort. At the same time, he also had to ensure that his product could function as both a defensive mech and an energy transfer mech!

Both mech designers had to exert the utmost of their knowledge base to find efficient solutions to the problems that emerged during the design process. They even had to hit the books and reference obscure science in order to overcome certain hurdles!

Fortunately, Gloriana was more than up to challenge while Ves easily absorbed new knowledge due to his augmentations. His new Archimedes Rubal implant didn't outright allow him to internalize knowledge instantly like the System, but the processing power it contained accelerated his learning speed by multiple times, allowing him to spend a day to learn knowledge that used to take a few days to a week!

"No wonder Seniors and Masters are able to keep up with knowledge that requires regular people to spend decades or centuries of their lives to study. They are all relying

on a combination of genetic modification and cybernetic implants to overcome their limits!"

Human civilization was a knowledge-based society.

Humans were inherently weak, and in the Age of Mechs, that remained unchanged.

That was fine, because the power of their bodies always paled in comparison to the technology they wielded!

Knowledge was the foundation of their success on the intergalactic stage!

While Ves always insisted that the heart was just as important as the mind to a mech designer, the Hexer mech project nonetheless stressed the latter to a much greater degree.

As his first second-class mech design, Ves began to encounter many issues he never worried about before!

"The higher the tech level, the greater the burden on the mind." He remarked.

Ves became a little more sympathetic towards the rational mech designers that dominated the MTA. The amount of knowledge it held on mechs must be so vast and overwhelming that only those who excelled in cultivating their minds and cognitive functions could keep up with the sheer amount of essential learning material!

Right now, the Hexer mech project had reached the half-way point. Its direction had already been set and all of the major design choices had already been made. All Ves and Gloriana needed to do now was to continue developing solutions to the remaining problems so that their new landbound knight mech became ready to be deployed in the Komodo War!

As for the less ostentatious striker mech project, Ves expected to finish it first.

Due to its lack of complexity, Ves handed over many of its aspects over to the design teams, and they did not disappoint. A project of this difficulty was a lot more within their means. As long as Ves and Gloriana made sure to oversee their efforts and review the results, they didn't have to spend too much time to herd this design towards completion!

"Once we hire additional mech designers, we can begin to delegate most of the work of designing third-class mechs to them." Gloriana pointed out. "We still need to set the direction and make all of the major design choices, but the competence of our first and second design teams have already reached a level where we don't have to hold their hands all the time. We only need to spend a bit of our time per project per session to make sure they develop on the right track."

"I know." Ves nodded. "That's my plan as well. I plan to hold a recruitment event at Rawlings University to pick up a lot of young and eager mech designers. While they'll probably be lacking in experience, that is exactly what I need to mold them into the right shape."

With the addition of more design teams, Ves could easily embark on multiple third-class design projects without meaningfully affecting his workload.

This meant that the LMC would finally be able to form a complete product family for the third-class mech market!

Ves hoped to relieve his straining finances with this plan. While the protection of the Penitent Sisters did much assuage his security concerns, their upkeep were bleeding his bank accounts dry!

"Where do we go from here, Ves?" His girlfriend asked.

"I'm not sure. Let's meet with the Larkinson Family and get the reunion out of the way. After we completed our two projects and published the mechs, I suppose we should start looking towards the future."

"You mean earning merits?"

He nodded. "When I explored the Rim Exchange's merit hall, I noticed that the Rim Guardians offered a lot of lucrative missions based in the Nyxian Gap."

"I thought you didn't want to enter this region." Gloriana furrowed her brows. "It was way too risky, you said."

"That was before we received reinforcements in the form of 600 second-class mechs. With a sufficient amount of strength, any risk can be overcome!" Ves grinned.

#### *Chapter 2023 The Friedmont Massacre*

Cinach Ves visited it once before during his tour through a portion of the star sector.

The Cinach System was as prosperous and industrious as ever. Controlled by various noble houses of the Sentinel Kingdom, the settled planets offered something for every Sentinel and visitor!

The identity that Ves held during his previous visit was completely different from his current identity!

Back then, he was a young Journeyman whose fame hadn't entirely reached the Sentinel Kingdom. While that still made him into someone of importance, he ranked

very low in every local power's consciousness. They treated him like one of the many foreign business partners that stopped by Cinach to conduct transactions.

That was no longer the case.

Even before the Larkinson Clan arrived at their destination, the Sentinel Kingdom already reached out to them in order to arrange their stay in the star system!

"The entire Sentinel Kingdom is afraid of us." Gavin summed up the day before. "You have to look at it from the perspective of their nobles and royals. Despite their eminent status within Sentinel, their state essentially operates under the auspices of the Hegemony!"

"That means that they can't afford to offend the Hexers, is that right?"

"Correct. While the Hegemony has always restrained their influence on the lesser states for diplomatic reasons, the Komodo War has changed that to an extent. The Friday Coalition has made a play for the lesser states, so the Hegemony has to follow suit as well!"

"Which means the Hexers have become a lot more overbearing outside their borders?" Ves guessed.

His assistant nodded. "There's a lot of political and diplomatic maneuvering going on behind the scenes, but most of it isn't very relevant to us. The only factors we need to take into account is that the Sentinels will likely treat us as an important diplomatic entity."

"We're not, though." Ves retorted. "Our Larkinson Clan doesn't hail from any state. We are completely independent."

"Tell that to the Sentinels who see us barging in with a very blatant sign of Hexer favor. Hardly anyone in the Cinach System will be able to ignore the presence of the Penitent Sisters and Glory Battalion! The fact that you have received the public backing of the Wodin Dynasty and is dating one of its descendants will only reinforce every Sentinel's impression that you are a de facto representative of the Hegemony!"

"Damnit..." Ves groaned and palmed his face. "I'm not a Hexer! Our Larkinson Clan is nothing like the dynasties of the Hegemony! My clan title starts with the letter P, not M!"

"Are you sure about that, boss?"

"Don't joke around, Benny!"

Even though Gavin started to wear the sky blue LMC uniform with the Golden Cat adorning his back, his dynamic with his superior hardly changed. Ves still interacted with his assistant with a contradictory mix of irrational distrust and jovial familiarity.

While Ves contemplated promoting Gavin to some useless desk job in order to obtain a more trustworthy assistant, in the end he shelved this plan. He couldn't imagine a future where his assistant was completely loyal to a fault like Nitaa.

Not only would such a helper be boring, Ves also feared he might grow complacent and stop being as paranoid around his gatekeeper!

The best way to prevent betrayers from one of the people he was closest to was to constantly maintain his suspicion!

Of course, in order to maintain the illusion that every Benny harbored double loyalties, Ves conveniently disregarded that Gavin Neumann-Larkinson was constantly operating under the supervision of the Golden Cat.

"Whatever the case, you can expect to receive VIP treatment wherever you go." He said. "You have already received invitations from institutions such as the Peacekeeper Association and Rawlings University. I've taken the liberty of filtering out the irrelevant ones while sending the more interesting ones to your comm. You can peruse them at your leisure or ignore them if you wish. They're not too important. The Executive Council is handling most of the communication with the Sentinel Kingdom so far. If there is anything you need, you can pass it on to the council members."

"Understood. Aside from meeting with the Larkinson Family, recruiting more mech designers and resupplying our fleet, I don't intend to do much else in the Cinach System." Ves spoke. "At the very least, I have to devote two more months to complete our current design projects. Both of them are very significant. One is designed to rejuvenate the LMC while the other one is meant to repay my debt to DIVA."

Once he got those two projects out of the way, Ves would hopefully have more room for maneuver. From there, he could look towards accepting a mission from the Rim Exchange or seek opportunities in other star sectors!

The Sentinel Kingdom wasn't only close to the Nyxian Gap, but also within range of Vicious Mountain.

The only problem was that many ships of his fleet weren't rated for cross-sector travel. Ves would have to leave them behind or replace them with more robust vessels that could withstand the possible rigors of inter-sector space travel.

For now, that was not something he could achieve in the short term.

"Are there any ships for sale in the Sentinel Kingdom?" Ves asked in a hopeful tone.

"No." Gavin shook his head. "While Sentinel has managed to stay out of the Sand War and the Komodo War, it is engulfed in its own conflict. Did you hear about the Friedmont Massacre?"

"Yeah..." Ves smiled in a brittle manner. "I did.. what a slaughter.."

"The pirates of the Nyxian Gap have become more and more brazen lately! Not only are they burning each other's strongholds in the Gap, they have also turned their weapons against civilized space!"

The Friedmont Massacre was a shocking event that took place some time ago. Friedmont V, a major industrial planet operated by House Kant, suddenly became the site of tragedy on an enormous scale when a bunch of doom crawlers that had been smuggled onto the planet began to lay waste to every major city and industrial district!

Billions of people died and trillions of sentinel crowns worth of assets disappeared in a matter of hours as nuclear-armed mechs launched their weapons at abandon before they were taken out by the vengeful surviving forces!

When Ves first heard of the massacre and watched the footage of the massacre, he quickly shut off the projection.

That was because he recognized his own work! The Spyre Helix he designed as an upgrade to an existing model of doom crawlers wasn't supposed to show up in civilized space! Finlay promised to him that his faction would only utilize them against the pirates of the Nyxian Gap!

Ever since the Friedmont Massacre stunned the Sentinel Kingdom, the shadow conflict between the Peacekeepers and the Nyxian pirates intensified to an unprecedented scale! The hostilities threatened to turn into a full-blown war if the two sides continued to escalate their attacks!

"Whoever perpetrated the massacre succeeded in toppling House Kant and destabilizing the Sentinel Kingdom." Gavin remarked. "I've heard the MTA sent an investigation team to track down the pirates and backers responsible for organizing the attack. I heard that they placed an enormous bounty on the mech designer who designed the doom crawlers! Can you believe they're willing to reward any tip that leads to the exposure of the mech designer's identity with a million MTA merits?"

Ves raised his eyebrows while doing his best to suppress his nervousness.

"That sounds rather cheap compared to the severity of the crime. I would feel tempted to join the hunt myself if the reward is a little higher!"

The Sentinel Kingdom was larger and more powerful than the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom. That meant that the intrigue taking place in the state was on a bigger

scale! The complication of the state's vicinity to the Nyxian Gap didn't help matters either as Ves was aware that the nobles often banded together with pirates from time to time!

The turmoil not only made the state less safe, but also increased the danger of any excursion into the Nyxian Gap.

That said, the rising risks of venturing out in a region the MTA was very interested in also increased the rewards to anyone who was willing to venture inside it to perform a mission!

This was the main reason why Ves still hadn't ruled this option out. Though the risks were high, the rewards were higher, and with the help of the Penitent Sisters and the Glory Battalion, he could outright ignore most pirate threats!

Of course, the Nyxian Gap contained greater perils than scattered pirate organizations. Even second-class mechs wouldn't be able to survive unscathed when they encountered a mysterious anomaly or came across a huge pirate organization!

Ves asked one more question. "Is there anything else we need to take note of before we arrive at Cinach?"

"There is one more detail. The state requested us to keep most of our fleet in the periphery of the star system. The Sentinel people are very uncomfortable with a powerful fleet lingering in the vicinity of an important planet. They're afraid our Hexer escorts might scare away visitors and depress commerce."

"That's a reasonable request. I take it the council has already come up with a decision?"

"For now, they agreed to keep the Penitent Sisters parked in the outskirts of the star system. The Glory Battalion and our clan vessels are all allowed to proceed ahead."

Ves thought for a moment. He recalled the times when he naively trusted the Bright Republic and the Ylvaine Protectorate to cover his back.

Yeah. He wasn't going to make that mistake again.

"While I understand the decision by the council, I don't agree with them. Tell them that I will overrule their decision!" He declared! "The Penitent Sisters will continue to accompany us while we are heading towards the inner system! This decision is final!"

He was not going to take any assumption of safety for granted, especially when the Sentinel Kingdom had become less stable in recent times! He would be a fool to put his strongest protectors numerous light-hours away!



Gavin frowned at his response. "We already agreed to abide by this reasonable demand."

"I don't care! You just told me that the Sentinels think I'm a Hexer envoy, right? Then let's act like one! I'm sure they'll roll over easily enough if we throw our weight around!"

The Executive Council wasn't happy with Ves' orders.

Too bad. The Penitent Sisters wasn't in their control. The Hexadric Hegemony directly seconded them to Ves instead of the clan. The Sisters were obliged to act according to his instructions, so there was nothing anyone could do to stop their advance to the inner system!

Before Gavin ended his briefing, he passed on one more detail. "By the way, Calabast asked me to pass on a message as well. She states that a couple of old friends and familiar faces might be showing up in Cinach as well."

"Did she say who?"

"No, but she said that some of them make for excellent recruitment material."

"Well, that's clarifying." Ves responded mildly.

It looks like a lot of different people were converging onto Cinach. Ves was curious who he might be able to meet and which of them were suitable to join the clan. As big as his fleet had already grown, Ves could always use more bodies, especially ones who could fight!

"The Sentinel Kingdom might be our final resting stop before we embark on an ambitious mission. We have to make the most out of our stay in Cinach." He muttered.

Around a year had passed since he formed his goal of earning enough merits to redeem a fleet beyonder ticket. Even though Ves had made enormous gains in his career and life during this period, he had hardly come closer to securing passage to the Red Ocean! If he didn't make any progress soon, he would definitely miss his self-imposed deadline!

### *Chapter 2024 Shared Blood*

The Larkinson Clan's entry into the Cinach System was a sight to behold!

Though the clan's starships were rather shabby, their numbers were enough to dwarf most other trade convoys passing through the local star system!

Their uniform appearances and the ubiquitous sight of the emblem of the Golden Cat did much to counteract their cheap origins. The hundreds of spaceborn mechs that

deployed from the light carriers to form a security perimeter also reinforced the impression that the Larkinson Clan was not that easy to chew!

As much as the ships and mechs of the Larkinson Clan made an impression on the locals, it was the Hexers who attracted the majority of the attention.

The Glory Battalion served as the direct extension of one of the medium-sized powers of the Hexadric Hegemony. Though the Wodin Dynasty wasn't particularly powerful in the massive state, its sheer might and wealth still surpassed anything the locals could scrounge up! Though the Glory Battalion was only able to effectively field a single mech company at this point, no one dared to take its mechs lightly!

As for the Penitent Sisters, their strength was enough to give a Sentinel mech division a run of their money. While such outcomes were highly variable depending on the circumstances of both sides, there was no doubt that provoking the ire of 600 second-class mechs was a one-way ticket to doom!

The one strange trait about the Penitent Sisters was that their ships and mechs all carried a symbol usually associated with the male gender.

Considering their name, a lot of Sentinels had already guessed that there was something very wrong about the Penitent Sisters.

No matter what they thought in private, the strength of the Sisters had to be respected. There was no way that anyone in Cinach would dare to mock the peculiar punishment outfit!

As the fleet gradually glided in the direction of Cinach VI, the mech-producing planet owned by House Evenson, Ves curiously studied the local plot of the star system.

Just like any industrious system, thousands of vessels were travelling in several directions. While most of them consisted of small craft and sublight cargo vessels that lacked FTL drives, plenty more ships came from other star systems and states.

"Business is booming as ever." Ves remarked. "War makes for a very profitable endeavor to star systems like Cinach."

Amidst all of the trade vessels, mercenary carriers, Peacekeeper outfits and military patrols, Ves finally identified a small fleet of ships parked in the orbit of Cinach VI.

One single starship within the fleet carried the name of Gracious Indigo. Last Ves heard, the second-hand light carrier as the flagship of the Larkinson Family.

Obviously, the Larkinson Family lacked the resources of the Larkinson Clan. Its 1 percent share in the LMC was enough to cobble up some mechs, but it was a stretch for

them to purchase new ships, especially in a war climate that significantly increased the value of star-faring vessels.

"How is the Larkinson Family doing, Benny?" Ves asked.

"They're doing fine, boss. For a time, they were split up between Larkinsons who managed to escape the manhunt in the Bright Republic and those who were caught in the net. That's no longer the case now. The two groups recently reunited when DIVA's rescue ship brought the former imprisoned Larkinsons to the old family."

"That's great."

Soon enough, Ves received a personal comm call from his famous uncle. He accepted the hail, causing a projection to form in front of his face.

"Ves." Ark Larkinson smiled at his blood cousin in a benevolent manner. "Your clan has finally arrived. I must say, your arrival certainly made a very huge impression on the citizens of the Cinach System. The local news portals have already raised all sorts of alarmist questions. I'm.. not comfortable with the company you keep."

The expert pilot must be referring to the Hexers.

To be honest, Ves wasn't comfortable with the female supremacists either, but they were necessary for his upcoming plans. He had become so entangled with the Hexers that he couldn't get rid of them even if he tried!

"Let's not talk about old matters. First, how are grandpa, Melinda and the rest?"

"They weren't mistreated. At least our former state had the decency to treat our family members with dignity." Ark grimaced. "That said, their capture and subsequent escape left plenty of mental trauma behind. They're not as easy-going as they used to be. Even your grandfather has grown more weary as of late."

"Will he be able to exercise some responsibilities?"

"He's been thinking about retirement every day. If not for the fact our family needs more steady leaders, he would have stepped back entirely. So far, we are thinking about elevating him to an advisory position."

"Ah. So it's just like his previous job, except he'll be helping you instead of the Ministry of Defense."

"Essentially, yes."

Both Larkinsons fell silent for a time.

Ark always held a special place in Ves' heart.

Even though he was already an illustrious expert pilot during the time Ves grew up, Ark never put on any airs to the son of his younger brother. They were truly family to each other every time they met and talked to each other.

As much as both of them wanted to go back to those simpler days, they couldn't. The silence that formed between the Larkinsons reflected all of the changes that took place over the past year.

The schism that tore apart the Larkinson Family, Ghanso's madness and the abrupt formation of the Larkinson Clan all drove a wedge between the two. The tension only grew worse when both Ves and Ark had become the leaders of their respective family organizations.

Already, the clan had radically diverged from the traditional customs of the family.

The family patriarch couldn't help but mention one of the most controversial decisions that Ves pushed through.

"Did you really have to grant our Larkinson name to so many people?" Ark painfully asked. "While I understand the necessity to secure the loyalty of people you are depending upon, our family isn't happy, to say the least."

Ves stubbornly crossed his arm. "What the family thinks is not my concern. Your group of Larkinsons have already made it clear that you don't want to be part of my clan's endeavors. I can accept that. However, don't turn around and try to control us as if we are still obliged to respect your opinions."

"I am aware of that, Ves. I don't mean to sound like a hypocrite. It is just that our Larkinson heritage is something that we both share. That means that we must both do our best to maintain the integrity of our name. While our family has diligently tried to preserve the honor and reputation of the Larkinson name, your clan did something outrageous by diluting it among thousands of people!"

"It's more than twelve-thousand by my count." Ves added.

"How much more will you add before you are satisfied, Ves?!" Ark slightly raised his tone.

"..I don't think our clan will ever stop adopting new people." Ves slowly replied. Though he disliked disappointing his uncle, as the patriarch of the clan, he had to stand up for his side! "We do things differently than the family. While we value our Larkinson heritage, we are much more willing to share it if it gains us the loyalty of many talented and capable people. To us, the meaning of our name no longer revolved around our bloodline! This is an outdated stance that will only limit our growth!"

Though the two Larkinsons had plenty more words to share, a casual comm call was not the most appropriate channel to hash out their grievances. Ark's dislike was clear to see, but he refrained from snapping back at his own cousin.

"Let's have a good talk when your fleet arrives at Cinach VI. As much as our family is peeved at your clan, our people are still very eager to see the Larkinsons that have left for the clan. After this reunion, it is highly uncertain if and when we will ever be able to meet each other again. For posterity's sake, we should make our final meeting as memorable and conclusive as possible."

The weight of their upcoming separation weighed heavily on every Larkinson, but especially on the minds of the two patriarchs.

The Larkinson Family never faced a situation like this where a large group of Larkinsons were determined to separate and go elsewhere. Even though the galactic net ensured that both groups of Larkinsons would be able to maintain contact with each other, the physical separation ensured that they would eventually drift apart, and not just physically.

How would the Larkinson Clan look like a century later? How would the Larkinson Family develop after suffering so much trauma within the same span of time?

No one dared to imagine how the clan or family would look like after so much time. In fact, one of them might meet calamity one day and become extinct during this period of time!

These uncertainties made it all the more important to cherish their upcoming reunion!

After sharing a knowing look with each other, they soon ended the call. Ves fell into thought after his chat with Ark.

"He's changed."

This observation was a reminder that the old days of his childhood were slowly becoming more irrelevant.

Ves was no longer the kid who was depressed about the fact that he didn't possess the genetic aptitude to pilot mechs.

Ark was no longer the rising war hero who made it through the previous Bright-Vesia War a lot better than Ryncol!

With the fall of Bentheim and the exodus from the Bright Republic, there was no way they could turn back the block and return to their old lives. Both of them had no choice but to proceed forward and hope their new lives ended up better!

When Ves recounted his conversation to Gloriana a few hours later, his girlfriend crossed her arms.

"With the restrained attitudes of your family, I doubt it will be able keep itself together. The Larkinson Family has only managed to hold on to the same values and customs because it always existed under the umbrella of the Bright Republic! Now that they have to face the elements on their own, they can't afford to be so soft anymore!"

Ves grimaced. "Are you saying the Larkinson Family will break up in the future?"

"It's a guarantee. They're too stubborn to change their ways. The fact that our clan pushed through the changes that were necessary to strengthen us for what is to come is even more of a reason for them to stick their heads in the sand! While I respect your uncle Ark as an accomplished expert pilot and mech officer, leaders like him are unqualified to lead his family in this cruel, male-dominated galaxy!"

"We have come a long way from our primitive, patriarchal ways." Ves coughed. "I can show you several studies that men and women hold an equal share of leadership positions in human space."

**"THOSE STUDIES ARE LIES! THEY'RE BIASED AND ONLY SERVE TO PUSH THE BIG TWO'S NARRATIVE THAT MALES ARE JUST AS COMPETENT AS WOMEN AS LEADERS!"**

Ves had to lean away from his girlfriend's tirade!

"Okay okay, whatever you say!" Ves sheepishly raised his hands. "Regardless, whether Ark Larkinson can serve as a good leader or not is not that important, I think. He's hardly the only capable member of the old family. There's my grandfather and many other respected Larkinsons who can guide them in the right direction."

"There are too many war-scarred brutes in your former family." Gloriana dismissed. "Whatever they choose will likely be slanted towards violence in some fashion or another."

"Our clan isn't too different from the old family in that regard." Ves defensively retorted.

Despite that, Gloriana sneered at him. "The Larkinson Clan is completely different, honey. It's led by brighter minds."

Ves pointed at himself. "You mean me?"

"...Maybe."

## *Chapter 2025 Hot Commodity*

When the so-called Larkinson Fleet arrived in orbit of Cinach VI, the entire planet seemed to prostrate before its arrival.

The household troops of House Evenson formed an honor guard to welcome the fleet's arrival. Forming a corridor which flanked the group of Larkinson Clan vessels from all sides, every other ship or vehicle in the vicinity had been chased away!

The grand display composed of almost a thousand mechs attracted a lot of publicity and amplified the interest in the Larkinson Clan even more! If Ves ever wanted his entry into the Cinach System to be low-key, then those chances were completely shot with the excessive display from the local nobles!

"What are the Sentinels doing?" Ves frowned as he observed the proceedings from the luxurious bridge of the Scarlet Rose.

"House Evenson wants to commission a mech from Gloriana and you." Gavin responded. "Your mechs have made quite a name, to say the least, and with Lady Miralix of House Laterna as a successful example, a lot of ambitious noble mech pilots think their careers will receive an enormous boost if they pilot one of your mechs!"

Though annoying, Ves also felt flattered. His professional reputation had finally reached a level where he no longer had to seek out customers.

Now, the customers were knocking on his doors!

"You know my stance on this matter." Ves dismissively replied.

"We've rejected their requests time and time again, but their envoys keep trying." Gavin sighed. "House Evenson seems to think that you're driving a hard bargain. Their negotiators continually raised their offers. They even found out that we're in dire need of high-quality ships and began to offer combat carriers if we complete their commissions!"

Did he really hear that right?! Ves sat upright in his chair. Combat carriers were far more valuable than light carriers, especially when Ves possibly sought to go on an excursion to the Nyxian Gap!

"Are you sure?! What do they want in exchange for some combat carriers?!"

His assistant looked hesitant all of a sudden. "Well.. they're only willing to remunerate you in full if you provide them with a masterwork mech. If that doesn't happen, then their offer becomes a lot less attractive."

"Oh." Ves dropped her excitement. "Forget about it. House Evenson is dreaming if I will expend so much effort on a possibility that is too miniscule to bother. Even if I luck out



and create another masterwork mech, I would rather submit it to the MTA to earn some merits or something."

Some of the interest in him was due to the powerful glows he was able to imbue in his mechs. However, much of the frenzy surrounding him was due to his proven ability to create a masterwork mech!

Though his chances of replicating this feat was still microscopic even if his mech affinity improved twice, that didn't faze the nobles at all. They already had a lot of money and resources at their disposal.

To them, commissioning a mech from him and Gloriana was like buying a lottery ticket. They might hit the jackpot, and all it cost were some ships and money that they already possessed in abundance!

Even if combat carriers were worth their weight in exotics these days, the noble houses could always order more from the shipyards at any time! In contrast, a masterwork mech, especially one tailored to a specific mech pilot, was something that could only be sought but never found!

Such a mech could propel the career of a noble mech pilot to meteoric heights!

As an entrepreneur, Ves keenly recognized the value he could potentially provide. He did not intend to be taken advantage of so easily!

Fortunately, his assistant already knew what to do and what to look out for. If someone offered something truly compelling, then Gavin would surely bring it up to Ves. Until then, there was no reason to disturb his thoughts.

As the pomp and circumstance in orbit finally died down, the Larkinson Clan began to make landfall with at least a third of its ships. Light carriers may not be able to take much of a hit, but they were still light and maneuverable enough to make landfall on any standard terrestrial planet.

One of the more significant problems affecting the clan members was their abrupt flight into space. As Captain Silvestra warned him some time ago, humans simply weren't adjusted to space travel. It took a lot of effort over multiple generations in order to breed a group of true spaceborn humans!

Until then, humans who were born on land and grew up on land always yearned to have solid ground beneath their feet. His clan members all yearned to experience the vast open spaces and the fresh air from the atmosphere of a livable planet!

So far, his family and his workers had been holding back their urges with a remarkable amount of success. They all knew that it was unwise to halt their journey and take a

break in some star system while the Friday Coalition was always looming over their backs.

Now that they finally reached their destination, the clansmen couldn't hold it in any longer! They were crowding the hatches and exit ports in order to escape the cramped corridors of their ships!

The clan couldn't afford to ground every vessel in its fleet, though. In order to guard against accidents, the Executive Council formed a rotation schedule that would give everyone in the fleet enough time to recover their sanity.

The vessels all landed in an empty base the clan rented from House Evenson. The facilities might not be as good as everyone hoped, but it provided Ves with a secure base of operations to spend the next two months.

"We'll stay in Cinach until our two ongoing mech design projects are complete." Ves reminded everyone. "Let us take the opportunity to rest and see to our battle readiness. I'm not sure what we'll do next, but there is a decent chance we'll encounter a lot of excitement. In order to rise up in the galaxy, we will have to take some risks!"

Ves emphasized the possible dangers they might encounter. Though Ves did not intend to drag the entire fleet through the Nyxian Gap, he still had to bring a sufficient amount of forces. If the clansmen believed they could leech off his success without risking their lives, they had another thing coming!

Since Cinach VI was also the site where the clan would reunite with the family, Ves wanted to give the weak-hearted one last chance to depart. Where he planned to go was no place for cowards!

As the vessels parked in the enormous yard, the clansmen began to settle in and fortify the base. Various Penitent Sisters, Glory Warriors and Avatars patrolled the perimeter on foot and in their mechs.

The clan was determined to never be caught by surprise again!

Ves was pleased that his clan members exhibited a lot of caution. Anyone would after suffering the continuous blows the clan had suffered from the hands of those they trusted. It seemed as if paranoia had the potential to become one of the clan's defining traits in the future.

The clan and the family had scheduled a date to hold a large welcoming and reunion party at a large and upscale hall in Torze, the capital city of Cinach VI. It would be a grand occasion where thousands of trueblood Larkinsons would all gather in a single location.

Naturally, they all intended to bring their mechs as well!

This was a grand occasion and one that required a lot of arrangements to ensure it proceeded both smoothly and safely. The last thing Ves and the others wanted to see was someone crashing a starship into the hall where almost every trueblood Larkinson congregated! Such a catastrophic attack would pretty much end the clan and family right then and there!

"We're holding the event in three days." Gavin notified Ves. "The old family arrived earlier and has already begun the preparations, but our clan has a lot more strength and resources at our disposal. The Hexers are particularly useful in ensuring that the meeting venue will remain secure."

"I understand." Ves nodded. "Is there anything we have to do in the meantime, or can I go back to the design lab in order to continue my design work?"

"While it isn't essential, it would be nice if you went out to meet with the local dignitaries from House Evenson and the royal house. As the clan patriarch, your personal presence will do much to honor the nobles."

Ves briefly contemplated the option before dismissing it. "I have no desire to waste my time on hobnobbing with the local snobs. Anything else, Benny?"

"There are a lot of personnel issues to go through. On the one hand, there are still a decent amount of vacancies in our clan and fleet. On the other hand, there are a lot of workers who declined to join the Larkinson Clan for one reason or another. Part of them wish to resign and be let go while others have shown a willingness to stay in the fleet."

Ves frowned. He was aware that there was a substantial minority of non-Larkinson employees who never applied to join the clan.

Their reasons varied. Some still viewed themselves as Brighters or other states. Others already belonged to distinct families and didn't want to lose their heritage.

"How many people have declined to join the clan?" He asked.

"Around eighteen percent percent of our total personnel."

"Get rid of them." Ves waved his hand.

"Pardon?"

"You heard me, Benny. Fire them. Encourage them to resign. Just kick them out of our fleet within two months!"

"I.. urge you to reconsider. Some of those people are very skilled and occupy essential positions. It would lead to a lot of turmoil if we suddenly let them go wholesale."

"THAT IS EXACTLY WHY THEY NEED TO GO!" Ves burst out in anger. "Our clan is meant to foster trust between our clansmen. How can we work alongside workers who refused to join our clan? How can we allow them to occupy critical positions where they are in place to do a lot of damage if they leak information or sabotage something important? Just get rid of them and hire some new people who are willing to join our clan!"

"That's.. not going to be easy. While there are plenty of skilled applicants from the Sentinel Kingdom, most of them are dubious in terms of background and loyalty. It will take a lot of vetting to verify their integrity."

"You have two months. That is plenty of time to make up for the shortfalls in our personnel roster. Tell the clan to do as I say. By the time we depart from this star system, I don't want any of our ships to bear any people who aren't part of our clan, have I made myself clear?"

"What about the Hexers, boss?"

"They're an exception."

"Okay. I'll pass on your instructions to the Executive Council. I'm not sure whether the council members are willing to abide by your demands, but I will make it clear that you are very adamant about this issue."

Though it would hurt the fleet in the short term, Ves thought it was worth it later on. While he recognized that those who refused to join the clan might have a lot of innocuous reasons to explain their choice, there was always a chance that a handful of them were spies or saboteurs!

Getting rid of the entire lot meant that there was a large chance that his fleet wouldn't be carrying any hostile elements anymore! To Ves, that peace of mind was priceless!

"The time that our main group operates through a mix of insiders and outsiders is over." Ves declared. "Aside from allied and auxiliary units like the Penitent Sisters, everyone who is part of our fleet must also be a part of our clan!"

It was fine if his clan or company employed regular workers in various subsidiaries or outposts. However, his future expeditionary fleet had to consist entirely of clansmen in order to ensure the highest degree of cohesion!

#### *Chapter 2026 The Two Patriarchs*

The sudden shift in policy towards the employees who refused to join the clan came as a major shock to everyone.

While there were plenty of people who expected the Larkinson Clan to phase out the uncommitted workers in their midst, they didn't expect it to come so soon and without transition!

Ves didn't care. Regardless of how many complaints and suggestions he received, he stood by his stance.

Considering his current prestige in his clan, the Executive Council and the Larkinson Assembly didn't dare to go against his will.

Besides.. his declaration made a lot of sense. Having suffered the sting of betrayal, his clansmen were a lot more sympathetic towards the idea of relying on themselves.

A lot of departures took place during this time. Thousands of workers received notices that their services were no longer required after a certain amount of time.

Fortunately, the people who rejected the clan didn't react as strongly as Ves and everyone feared. Over the last few weeks, they had already seen the new clansmen become more close and trusting towards each other.

While that was a great development to the new Larkinsons, the people who declined to apply were feeling increasingly more left out. It was as if they were observing a jovial gathering of family members through the window of a house.

Leaving the fleet was a form of relief. The Sentinel Kingdom wasn't a bad place to start a new life. It was a powerful third-rate state that had remained mostly unaffected by the two major wars raging throughout the star sector.

While the conflict with the Nyxian pirates was heating up, this war was of a much lower intensity than the Sand War. It provided enough turbulence to open up a lot of employment opportunities for skilled and proven personnel while being small enough to dismiss the danger.

Overall, no one was overly dissatisfied with this decision. Ves made sure to thank the laid-off workers and mech pilots with a generous amount of severance pay.

With the upcoming reunion coming close, the Larkinson Clan quickly turned its attention back to what really mattered.

Though the amount of trueblood members in the clan turned into a minority, they still held most of the leadership positions for now! That together with other factors meant that they still held the greatest voice in the clan for the time being!

Therefore, even if most members of the clan weren't blood-related to the Larkinson Family, they still cared a lot about the outcome of the reunion. Plenty of them had

volunteered to join the honor guard and even more wanted to enter the hall to hobnob with their 'new' relatives!

However, in the best interest of preserving harmony, the clan and the family both decided to keep the reunion centered around trueblood Larkinsons.

As three days went by in a whirl of activity, the awaited moment had finally arrived.

The Larkinsons departed from their rented base in a grand procession.

The mechs of the Penitent Sisters and the Glory Warriors patrolled the outer perimeter and scouted forward, but it was the mechs of the Avatars and Sentinels that played the starring role!

Bright Warriors, Blackbeaks Crystal Lords and many other mech models lined the procession of passenger shuttles from both sides. The clan had already fixed up their appearances with gleaming coating that matched the visual overhaul of other ships and mechs!

No matter the mech or vehicle, the emblem of the Golden Cat proudly adorned their surfaces, marking them as the exclusive property of the new but already formidable Larkinson Clan!

Traffic throughout the entire route had already been cordoned off by House Evenson. The local nobles showed incredible eagerness in accommodating the needs of the clan. Though the temporary blockades annoyed the hell out of the locals of Torze, Ves valued the safety of keeping bystanders away.

The clan made sure to present themselves at its best. Every trueblood Larkinson wore the same new uniforms with brand-new badges and medals to those who earned it during the Sand War and the Battle of Kesseling VIII.

Ves on his part contemplated whether he should wear his old awards from the Bright Republic. The Golden Mech, The Darkness Eater, the Torchbearer and so on might as well be worth as much as scrap metal with the decline of his home state, but they still carried a lot of significance to the original Larkinsons.

In the end, Ves decided to keep his uniform bare. He no longer had anything to do with the Bright Republic and the Mech Corps and wearing their medals only bestowed them with honor they did not deserve.

His girlfriend agreed with his decision.

"You're the clan patriarch now, honey. You can still act however you like in private, but in public, each of your actions will be scrutinized. Official functions and formal gatherings are some of the stressful places to be in because you can be sure that a lot

of observers will be analyzing everything about you until there are no more secrets left to glean from your words and body language!"

Ves grimaced as he petted Lucky resting on his lap. "The reunion isn't a diplomatic exchange. It's just a meeting between two different sides of a family."

"Oh, Ves. It's not that simple anymore. You're a man on the rise. Your complicated relationship with the old family will certainly be a topic of interest. When you are about to step out of this shuttle, don't behave as if you are paying a visit to your relatives. Treat it as a public function, because everyone else will be looking at it from this angle anyway."

His girlfriend, who decided to doll herself up and wear a shimmering night blue dress instead of a clan uniform, made a lot of sense.

He fell silent as he enjoyed the flowery scent of her perfume. Both Lucky and Clixie lazily rested on their owner's laps while the Golden Cat curiously looked in the direction of the hall from her perch in the Larkinson Mandate.

The ancestral spirit already possessed a connection with the members of the Larkinson Family by virtue of its existence. While the members of the old family weren't connected to the clan's exclusive spiritual network, Ves still found it convenient to keep track of the lives and directions of every family member!

As Ves observed the spiritual network, he noticed that most of them had gathered in the vicinity of the meeting hall.

The few family members who weren't on Cinach VI were located very far away.

Of particular note to Ves was two particular Larkinsons.

Ves had already determined to his displeasure that Ghanso was likely residing somewhere in the Friday Coalition.

As for his father, the tether that signified the Golden Cat's connection clearly pointed to somewhere Nyxian Gap before becoming completely fuzzy. It seemed that the anomalous space warping of this asteroid-filled region was distorting the weak bond.

What Ves found disturbing was that while the Golden Cat was able to maintain at least some form of passive connection to every relative, the bond that represented his mother was nowhere to be found!

Was it because his mother actively cut off her presence from the Golden Cat, or was it because she never considered herself to be a Larkinson to begin with?



Either possibilities sounded disconcerting to Ves. His mother was becoming increasingly unfathomable to him. A part of him wanted to talk to her again. Another part of him wanted to get as far away from her as possible!

"She's the original energy vampire." He muttered under his breath.

A very scary realization suddenly struck him. Did he subliminally design his striker mech to match the characteristics of his mother?!

His eyes widened as he listed the similarities.

First, the remnant of the Idol of the Superior Mother put him on a path to form a design spirit that would likely carry over the name of its source!

This meant that despite its masculine contours, his landbound knight mech would likely be watched over by a matriarchal design spirit of his own design, one that would likely share a lot of similarities with his actual mother!

Second, he envisioned a mech that could not only store and carry a lot of electrical energy, but also siphon it from both willing and unwilling sources!

While his own mother manipulated spiritual energy rather than electrical energy, they were still capable of performing the same actions to empower themselves or others!

Naturally, there were a huge amount of differences as well. Ves relaxed a bit when he concluded that a spiritual sorceress and a mech design were not actually comparable in the slightest. The two similarities were complete coincidences and had nothing to do with each other.

Ves emphatically did not design his Hexer mech to reflect his own experiences as a son who was constantly being coddled by his overbearing mother!

"What are you thinking about, Ves?" Gloriana curiously observed his changing expressions.

"Ah, nothing, haha." Ves sheepishly scratched the back of his head. "I am just nervous, that's all. I'm afraid our clan won't be able to measure up against the old family despite the growth we've gone through. Our foundation isn't stable."

"It will be fine." Gloriana reassured him. "Look, we're almost at our destination. Let's get ready to greet the other side of the family, shall we?"

Once the shuttle at head of the procession landed at the designated landing spot, Ves, Gloriana, their cats and their exited the vehicle.

The subsequent shuttles followed suit and disgorged their uniformed passengers.

The masses of red-and-white, yellow-and-white, grey-and-white and blue-and-white uniforms instantly brightened up the avenue leading up to the large and traditional-looking meeting hall.

The members of the Larkinson Family who had arrived half an hour earlier all waited at the top of the raised steps. Unlike the clansmen, the members of the old family all wore a variety of civilian outfits. While their appearances weren't awful, the lack of uniformity caused them to look distinctly less organized than their estranged relatives!

The common appearances instilled a sense of psychological unity in the clansmen. They reinforced this impression by filing into ranks and marching towards the steps with something akin to a military column!

The Bright Warriors and other LMC mechs taking up positions along the sides of the avenue only strengthened that impression!

In one of his preparations for this occasion, Ves had tweaked the glows of his mechs. He employed some spiritual tinkering in order to temporarily tune down the glows of the Blackbeaks and Crystal Lords. This allowed the glows of the Bright Warrior mechs to become more prominent!

The aura of the Golden Cat soon began to engulf the entire venue. The Larkinson family members who witnessed the approach of the column all began to feel a glow that felt both new and familiar!

The Larkinson glow became more and more overbearing to the family members as the Bright Warriors approached the meeting hall. In fact, the Larkinson Family risked losing its composure entirely if not for their family patriarch!

The old family had to show its might. Ark Larkinson began to exhibit his own prowess!

A force of will that shared some resemblance to the Golden Cat's glow began to envelop the minds of the family members like a protective blanket.

While it wasn't as oriented towards protection as Brutus' force of will, Ark possessed the remarkable ability of fortifying the confidence of those he affected!

As expected, his uncle was a formidable leader! Ark was perhaps the strongest expert pilot that Ves had ever witnessed!

As the members of the clan began to climb up the steps, the head of the column eventually stopped.

The two patriarchs locked eyes. Both the Journeyman and expert pilot exhibited their respective abilities. While they excelled in different abilities, no Larkinson thought lightly of their abilities!

Eventually, Ark began to bow. "Members of the Larkinson Clan. I am glad to see you once again. No matter what disagreements we might share, you are always family to us. We are glad to see you safe and sound."

Ves smiled and nodded. "Our clan is happy to hear your well-wishes. I share your sentiment. While over differences will doubtlessly grow over time, what we have in common will always make us family to each other."

The reunion between the two branches of Larkinsons had finally begun!

### *Chapter 2027 Blurring Differences*

After the rather stiff exchange of greetings at the entrance, both groups of Larkinsons entered the meeting hall.

The large venue had undergone a minor overhaul in the preceding days. The interior decorators transformed the furniture and surroundings to be more in line with Brighter styles. This infused a strong sense of familiarity to the trueblood Larkinsons. Despite fleeing all the way to the Sentinel Kingdom, they still carried forth a piece of their home!

Once they entered the hall, the Larkinsons began to seat themselves at the rectangular tables.

The reunion started off with a sumptuous banquet. With family members sitting on one side and clan members sitting on the other side of the table, they both began to warm their bellies with the regional specialties of the Bright Republic.

The clan and family both made sure to employ chefs familiar with Brighter cuisine to cook the dishes. A lot of nostalgia appeared on the faces of the Larkinsons.

Regardless of their allegiances, both clan and family members began to reminisce about the olden days when the Larkinson Family was still a single entity.

Mothers and daughters, grandfathers and grandsons, aunts and nieces and many other estranged relatives began to loosen up in each other's presence.

It was as Ves had said. Their differences may have grown, as evidenced by the growing disparities between the two groups, but their shared origins and values still tied them together!

Sitting at a small table placed at the end of the hall, the two patriarchs calmly dined opposite to each other.

Two more people sat at the table as well.

Gloriana immediately stood out due to her proximity to Ves and her special identity.

Benjamin Larkinson served as a calming influence to the two leaders.

Both Ves and Ark tried their best to abide by their father and grandfather's desire for harmony!

"I'm glad to see you safe, grandfather." Ves began. "Have the rescuers I've dispatched treated you nicely enough?"

"Oh, the Hexers clearly don't respect the men they rescued." His grandfather ruefully smiled. "Still, that's hardly worth bothering over considering that most of us managed to escape and meet with fellow relatives in this state. I am very thankful for what you have done. It must have been difficult to convince the Hexers to perform such a major operation in an out-of-the-way state."

Gloriana smiled and answered for her boyfriend. "It is no trouble, Mr. Larkinson. My state is very appreciative towards Ves. The Larkinson Family is one of the few truly honorable military families in this star sector. You are too good for the Bright Republic."

Both Ark and Benjamin Larkinson looked at Gloriana with varying degrees of interest. To Ves, it looked as if they didn't really know what to make of his girlfriend!

While Gloriana was an unabashed Hexer, she was also very charming and very adept in social functions. She didn't exhibit the rampant dislike towards men that other Hexers tended to show!

He stretched his hand towards his girlfriend. "Grandfather, uncle, meet my girlfriend. I'm sure you are already aware of her identity. Aside from our personal relationship, she's also my collaborator and business partner. Our respective specialties play well with each other, allowing us to design mechs that are better than what we are able to design on our own. Much of the success that I achieved recently is thanks to her presence in my life."

Gloriana beamed at his praise. "Ves is such a great boyfriend. I'm very happy to be at his side! I couldn't have asked for a more perfect lover!"

"I'm glad to hear that the two of you have managed to make your relationship work. I was afraid that the two of you are only together due to practical reasons."

"We love each other with all our heart!" Gloriana declared in a way that left no room for doubt! "I would do anything to make him happy, and he feels the same way about me. Not even the Friday Coalition has managed to break our relationship!"

Ves quietly coughed when she said those words. Though most of what she said was true, he had some doubts about the claim that she would do 'anything' to make him happy. There were plenty of nights where he was left unsatisfied!

Though Gloriana put up a wholesome act in front of Ves' grandfather and uncle, her identity was not something that the two were able to forget!

The smile on Benjamin's face turned a little frail. "Please forgive this old man, but I am rather perplexed why a Hexer such as you are happy with someone like Ves. Professional reasons aside, the two of you come from completely different states. What do Hexers such as you think of my grandson?"

This was a very thorny question to ask. Ves glared a bit at his grandfather!

Fortunately, Gloriana didn't show any discomfort.

"Ves is.. a special person. As the youngest Masterwork Mech Designer of this star cluster, his identity is different from the other.. men.. we are familiar with. While I can't honestly claim that every Hexer is able to respect him for who he is, my Wodin Dynasty is different. My mother personally approves of our relationship!"

"It doesn't really matter anyway what other Hexers think." Ves quickly interjected. "You don't have to question my masculinity, father. I'm not stupid enough to move to the Hegemony. I'm sure you've already heard that I have set my sights on a different galaxy."

Both of the other Larkinsons looked severe.

"I don't blame you for wanting to leave." Ark remarked. "It's a shame to distance yourself from our family, though. It will become increasingly harder to stay in touch if we go our separate ways."

"Our departure is already a matter of time. Sooner or later, we'll be going elsewhere. I have an immense desire to see what the rest of human civilization is like. Our little corner of the galaxy is hardly enough to satisfy my curiosity!"

The small group fell silent for a moment. Ves made it clear that he was very determined to lead his clan away. Ark and Benjamin knew better than to continue their futile attempt to get the clan to stay.

Benjamin began to divert his interest to Gloriana. He wanted to familiarize himself with the girl who managed to steal his grandson's heart. There was only so much he could gain from reading about her on the galactic net.

"Do you like cats?"

"I just love them!" Gloriana beamed in an adorable manner. She picked up Clixie and hugged her cat tightly against her chest! "My Clixie gets along well with Ves and Lucky. Am I right?"

"Miaow."

Clixie's elegant and well-behaved demeanor fascinated Benjamin. "She is certainly an exemplary cat. How have you been getting along with Ves? Do you share other interests with him aside from your shared liking of mechs and cats?"

"Oh, we are both invested in the Larkinson Clan, of course. My Wodin Dynasty has done much to protect the clan and help it survive against the machinations of the Friday Coalition."

The two Larkinsons didn't react to that statement. While Gloriana didn't lie, her entanglement with Ves was the main reason the Friday Coalition turned hostile to their family to begin with! She could hardly claim to be their benefactor when she herself was responsible for starting the initial fire!

Neither of them wished to rehash an old, controversial argument on the first day of their reunion. They were more interested in moving on and looking towards the future.

"I've heard that one of your relatives is an expert pilot." Ark began. "I also heard that he has been pivotal in defending the clan."

"Would you like to meet him, Mr. Ark?"

"It's not a high priority. I am merely curious about meeting a fellow expert pilot. I can't help but feel intrigued to talk to a male Hexer expert pilot."

"Brutus would love to exchange with you, I think. The class disparities matter less to expert pilots, and my brother is already used to interacting with lots of third-class mech pilots. He's not here right now but I'll send him a message to arrange a meeting with you. It would be good for him to share his thoughts to a peer."

Though Gloriana made it sound as if Brutus had a choice, Ves knew that the Wodin expert pilot would do whatever her sister said. Hexer boys were simply trained that way by their female overlords!

The discussion shifted to other casual and innocent topics for a time. Both Ark, Benjamin and even Ves began to learn more about Gloriana.

For example, they heard how Gloriana received a very strict and demanding upbringing in the Hegemony. Despite the high expectations put on her shoulders, she expressed an immense affection towards her mother.

They also learned that Gloriana had an option to become the direct disciple of Master Mech Designer when she studied at Kelma University!

"I respectfully refused the offer." She stated as she elegantly sipped a cup of tea. "While it is a great honor to receive the care and guidance of a respected Master in our industry, I already chose my future direction. Back then, I was confident that I could design the mechs of my dreams with my own abilities! I'm still confident these days. In fact, I'm even more hopeful that I can achieve my goal with Ves by my side!"

The passion she exuded when she talked about her profession was quite intense. Both Ark and Benjamin Larkinson became more impressed by Gloriana. Their unease about her Hexer background gradually eased. They no longer worried as much about Ves being led astray by a woman with a very different view on how men should be treated!

Ves wondered if Gloriana had always been this charming or if she picked up some tricks from him. She clearly went all out to leave the best possible impression behind in their minds!

Eventually, the conversation shifted in a direction where Ark and Benjamin slowly began to hint they wanted to talk to Ves alone.

Gloriana tactfully excused herself. She picked up her cat and left for the restroom in order to freshen up and whatnot.

Once she walked away, both of the older Larkinsons looked at Ves with a mixture of concern and suspicion.

"If your current circumstances are not as ideal as it sounds, please give us a hint." Ark whispered while putting his hand in front of his mouth.

"That's not the case!" Ves softly protested. "There is no coercion or anything like that going on! I genuinely love Gloriana and she loves me back just as much!"

They believed him. "That's good to hear, Ves. We were concerned that the truth was different. After all, just look at how many Hexers are surrounding you. Not only do you have a Hexer as a girlfriend, but you also have a disconcerting amount of Hexer troops surrounding you on all sides!"

"The Glory Battalion are mostly there to protect Gloriana while the Penitent Sisters are hardly aligned with the Hegemony. The latter are basically exiles on punishment duty."

"Sounds like an interesting story."

"I'll tell you about them later. My point is that I'm still an independent man who can make my own decision. I haven't defected to their side, if that is what you are afraid of. I think the best way to describe my relations with the Hexers is that we've become allies. While we share some common interests, I can still make my own choices. Otherwise I wouldn't be so eager to leave this star sector."



Benjamin looked incredibly relieved. "I'm glad to hear that, grandson. While I never had someone like Gloriana in mind when I told you to find a girlfriend, I'm glad to see you have found a woman to your liking. Love is one of the most valuable pleasures in life. Cherish your relationship. The experiences you share with her will only happen once. When you reach my age, you'll realize that your upcoming years will be the happiest moments of your life!"

"I will." Ves softly replied. "I'm committed to Gloriana, and she is to me. While there are several kinks in our relationship, I'm sure we can work them out over time."

"As long as you are happy, Ves. As long as you are happy."

In this moment of reunion, the differences between the Larkinson Family and Larkinson Clan had blurred. Ves and Benjamin were just grandson and grandfather to each other.

This was what family was all about!

#### *Chapter 2028 Defectors*

The first day of the meeting between Larkinsons mostly centered around reuniting the separated groups of family members.

A lot of trueblood Larkinsons received the opportunity to greet relatives who they hadn't seen or talked to for months.

Of particular note were the Larkinsons who had been taken prisoner. After DIVA rescued them from Spotlight, they had been brought to the Sentinel Kingdom as promised.

Not a lot of former prisoners seemed thankful that Ves arranged them to be rescued. Ves could feel the resentful stares directed at his position at the head of the banquet.

He didn't blame them for feeling this way. There was no way that Ves could excuse the misfortune thrust upon them due to his actions.

Even so, he wasn't about to apologize to them either. There was hardly any point to it considering that it wouldn't convert them into clansmen.

Ves did not exhibit any surprise when Ark Larkinson mentioned that almost all of the rescued Larkinsons preferred to follow Ark and the old family.

The goals and vision that Ark had set for the Larkinson Family appealed much more to the average family member. The Larkinsons had never dreamt of ruling the galaxy or becoming a dominant power in a star sector.

They just wanted to raise their families and live an honorable life of service, preferably to a worthy cause. They held no desire for adventure and possessed no stomach for taking risks.

Space might be boundless and full of unknowns, but the overwhelming majority of humanity was content with sticking to their familiar corner of the galaxy.

In any case, the rejection he received from so many Larkinsons didn't bother him anymore. He already poached the most open-minded and adventurous relatives from the old family. Whoever remained no longer fit with the profile of his clan.

Another reason why Ves no longer cared as much was due to the recent expansion of the clan. Even though the ten-thousand adopted clansmen still diverged from the ideal mold of a Larkinsons in many ways, their loyalty and dedication to the clan was undeniable!

Ves valued those traits more than blood kinship. Even the Kinnners earned more regard than him than most of the members of the old family!

That said, there were always exceptions. Certain individuals within the Larkinson Family still earned his love and respect.

For example, Ves always valued the intimacy he shared with his closest blood relatives. Ark Larkinson and Benjamin Larkinson had both been important figures in his youth. Though he had already grown up and made his own accomplishments, a part of him would always look up to his uncle and grandfather.

He enjoyed his cordial talk with them during the opening banquet. Neither of the two older Larkinsons wanted to make things difficult for him. At no time during their discussion did they press any blame for the turmoil that Ves had directly and indirectly caused.

That said, the three couldn't avoid every difficult topic entirely.

When the conversation turned towards the question of a possible merger between the clan or family, both sides remained stubborn.

"We are all Larkinsons no matter what we believe in." Benjamin argued. "Both of you are different, but it isn't as if we have ever insisted that every Larkinson should be a carbon copy of each other."

"Nice try, grandpa, but it is far too late for that." Ves snorted. "I doubt the old family can stomach the idea of adopting new Larkinsons en masse."

Ark crossed his arms. "While I love Ves as my brother's only son, his ideas are too radical and irresponsible for us to accept."

"I think our current course is already a good outcome. Rather than try to corral a bunch of disagreeing Larkinsons in a single direction, it's best to maintain the split so that every Larkinson can get what they want. Breaking up a group is not always a bad outcome when the benefits outweigh the costs."

"Everyone has a different valuation of the costs." Benjamin depressingly remarked. "In the history of our lineage, we have never suffered a split as awful as now. The amount of friendships and kinships that have been broken the past years has inflicted a lot of damage to our sense of togetherness. Family members should always support each other. Isn't that our rule?"

Neither Ark nor Ves fully agreed with the elder Larkinson. There were only so many differences that they could tolerate.

"I think this outcome is already set in stone." Ves declared. "The best we can do is to manage our permanent split and make sure that there is as little animosity towards each other as possible. There is no need for us to part ways on a bad note."

Though every Larkinson looked a little sad at the mention of going their separate ways from each other, there was no choice.

The Larkinson Family didn't want to get caught up with Ves and his clan's antics ever again. It just wanted to find a stable home where they could resume their old lives as closely as possible.

The Larkinson Clan no longer considered the local star cluster to be their home. There were a lot more gains to be made elsewhere!

As long as this contradiction stood, a merger was off the table.

When Benjamin saw that his weak entreaties of reconciliation fell flat, he no longer tried to mind fences. In the end, his son and grandson were simply too different from each other!

As the evening began to wound down, a notable event took place at the end of the banquet.

A large group of clansmen separated from the ranks of the rest of the clan. Despite wearing their new uniforms, they slowly separated from the family members they spent the last few months with. Though they felt a bit ashamed at their actions, they had already made up their minds!

Ves silently counted the Larkinsons walking up to him. In the end, around a hundred trueblood clansmen committed to their decision to leave the clan!

The clansmen they left behind all sent resentful looks at the defectors. They especially directed their ill will towards Caratan Larkinson, who still carried the mark of shame bestowed by the Golden Cat!

Even the members of the Larkinson Family reacted with mixed emotions at the spectacle. Duty, loyalty and commitment were important values to the Larkinsons. Even though the clansmen had already betrayed the family once by joining the clan, it was still somewhat excusable due to their differences.

For the leavers to change their minds yet again due to losing heart of the risks that the clan intended to take was another matter!

Their conduct was distinctly dishonorable. They had made their choice, but backed off very quickly after they encountered actual danger! If they were soldiers of the Mech Corps, they would have faced disciplinary action if they tried to desert!

Nonetheless, Caratan Larkinson and his band continued to march forward even though all of the attention turned it into something akin to a walk of shame.

"That's less leavers than you initially expected, right?" Gloriana whispered to him as she maintained a very authentic-looking smile.

The initial estimate he received was double the current figure. It seemed that in the intervening months between their journey from Kesseling to Cinach caused a lot of trueblood Larkinsons to reconsider their choice!

The warmth conveyed by the spiritual network and the close intimacy that every clansman shared towards each other probably did much to change their minds.

While Ves wasn't exactly pleased with retaining the clansmen who had been feeble-hearted enough to signal an intention to defect, he did not wish to make this spectacle uglier for everyone involved.

Though Caratan Larkinson received a lot of nasty looks after he had been kicked from the Larkinson Assembly, the stubborn pride of his bloodline compelled him to maintain a straight and dignified demeanor.

He refused to show any shame or defeat! He did not regret the choice he made!

Once the old man stopped in front of Ves, he bowed his head in a stiff manner.

"I wish to formally withdraw myself from the Larkinson Clan. Do I have your permission to leave, patriarch?"

Everyone turned their attention towards Ves. Wearing his red-and-white clan uniform and holding the Larkinson Mandate under his arm, the clan patriarch looked incredibly serious.

"You have my permission to leave."

Just as Caratan was about to turn around and loosen the collar of his clan uniform, Ves extended the book in his grasp.

"Please wait. Before you go, you must undergo one more ritual."

Caratan frowned. "What must I do?"

"Please place your palm on the cover of this book and state your intention to leave."

"Why?" The leaver looked at the book with a mixture of fear and suspicion. By now, every Larkinson knew that there was something strange about the Larkinson Mandate! "I have already filed the necessary paperwork."

"We are a clan that abides by rituals. This is one of the essential rituals I've set for anyone who is permitted to leave the clan. If you are honest in your intentions and do not intend to harm or sabotage us, then we won't have any problems with your departure. If that isn't the case, then we will need to keep you for a while longer."

A lot of defectors and other Larkinsons looked disturbed at this explanation!

"And this.. book.. is going to help you determine whether I sabotaged the clan or something?" Caratan feebly asked.

Ves smiled at Caratan like a shark. "Believe what you will. As long as there is nothing bothering your conscience, you have nothing to fear. Just get on with it already so I won't have to deal with your repulsive presence any longer!"

After a bit of reluctance, Caratan pressed his wrinkly palm on the golden medallion adorning the front cover. With his skin touching the contours of the emblem of the Golden Cat, he once again announced his intention to leave the clan!

"I, Caratan Larkinson, wish to leave the Larkinson Clan! From here on now, I shall hold no obligations to the clan, understanding that I am no longer entitled to its privileges! Let my declaration be witnessed!"

The Larkinson Network began to stir. The Golden Cat, who had been paying attention all this time, extended her claws. A small amount of spiritual energy flowed into them, imparting the intangible claws with mysterious power.

With a single, decisive swipe, the Golden Cat severed the bond that tied Caratan Larkinson to the Larkinson Clan!

For an instant, a profound sense of separation seemed to take place! Though the regular family members didn't sense anything strange, the members of the clan all felt the sudden loss!

The clan no longer ostracized Caratan Larkinson. The clan didn't feel anything about him because he was no longer part of the spiritual network!

Ves observed everything with his spiritual vision. The Golden Cat decided to make a clean cut to the bond, signifying that she didn't have any issue with Caratan.

"Goodbye, Caratan." He spoke after concluding that Caratan hadn't sabotaged the clan or tried to smuggle some classified information on his way out. "No matter how short you have been with the clan, you were our comrade for the time you have been with us. I wish you good luck on your future endeavors with the old family."

Caratan frowned, but refrained from making an acid remark. What was done was done and he got what he wanted. He simply turned around and joined the ranks of the Larkinson Family while slowly peeling off his uniform coat.

"Next, please."

The rest of the defectors followed suit. Everyone of them announced their intention to depart, and the Golden Cat cut them off the Larkinson Network as if she was just taking out the trash!

What Ves found interesting about this ritual was that the defectors may have lost active bonds with the Golden Cat, but still retained a hint of a passive bond. This meant that the Golden Cat treated them like the rest of the members of the Larkinson Family. They weren't part of the clan anymore, but still retained their identity as Larkinsons!

Ves wasn't the only one who sensed the spiritual changes taking place.

Standing a short distance away, Ark Larkinson frowned a bit as he stared at the book his nephew held.

There was more to this ritual than mere symbolism!

*Chapter 2029 Sad Ves*

The first day of the Larkinson reunion ended on a fairly good note. Despite the defections that took place, the loss to the clan was significantly smaller than Ves expected.

The clan's growing cohesion had already started to take effect! The shared identity among the clan members had all grown to a point where they were truly proud to wear their distinctive uniforms!

The next day, the Larkinsons on Cinach VI continued to mingle with each other. A lot of trueblood clan members received permission to take some time off to meet with their fellow relatives from the other branch of the Larkinsons on an individual basis.

Small groups of Larkinsons gathered together to commiserate about their shared experiences in the good old days.

Even Ves decided to take a break from working on his two mech design projects to meet with some relatives.

When he looked at the list of family members rescued by DIVA, he immediately honed in on a single name.

After arranging a meeting, Ves finally got to meet with one of his favorite cousins at the temporary base rented by the clan.

When Melinda Larkinson stepped into his office, she looked impressed at what she saw along the way!

"Ves! I already knew you were kind of a big deal, but I never imagined you would be able to gather so many mechs and people in your clan!"

"Melinda." Ves dropped his airs and smiled as if he was ten years younger. "I'm so glad to see you safe and sound. I was scared of what might happen to you when the government took you into custody."

The two came close until they hugged each other. Pure affection engulfed the both of them as they were overjoyed to see each other again!

Eventually, they separated and sat down at the desk.

"Spotlight didn't treat me that badly." Melinda remarked. "The government may have rounded up our family, but we never committed any crimes."

"So how are you doing these days?"

"I'm fine. While I miss my old job, I still feel content as long as I'm with the family. I've been spending a lot of time with the Larkinson Family."

"Melinda.. does that mean.."



She sighed. "After hearing about all of the differences between the clan and the family, I really can't make any other choice. I understand what you want and I will always support your efforts, but that isn't me. I don't like fighting. I don't want to seek out conflict. Working at the Planetary Guard was nice because I wouldn't have to ruin other people's lives for a living. I would much rather prefer to protect people with my abilities."

"You can do that as well in the clan." Ves suggested. "The Living Sentinels is perfect for you. My Sentinels are dedicated to protecting the lives and assets of the clan. There won't be any instances where they will be expected to take offensive action."

"Nice try, Ves, but the trouble you seem to attract is rather disconcerting." Melinda threw a strained smile at him. "I heard a lot of tales from the family members I've been lodging with and swapped even more stories with some of the members of your clan through my comm. I think I have a pretty good idea where you want to take the clan. When I asked myself if I wanted to be a part of it, I didn't receive an encouraging answer."

In the end, her heart yearned for a different life. Ves recognized that Melinda truly wouldn't join the clan. With this small hope crushed, he no longer tried to convince his cousin to join the clan. Their values were simply too incompatible with each other.

As the mood turned melancholic between the two, Lucky suddenly floated onto Melinda's lack. He rolled around and presented his belly to the female Larkinson.

"Oh, Lucky! It's good to see you again! You're so cute!"

Melinda enjoyed herself as she caressed Lucky's metallic skin.

"Meow!"

Lucky always seemed to enjoy the affection of women! Ves glanced at his cat with a mix of appreciation and betrayal.

One the one hand, he appreciated Lucky for cheering Melinda up. On the other hand, he resented his cat for his habit of seeking the comfort of others instead of him! It wasn't as if Ves kicked his cat every day!

"Meow meow meow!"

"Oh, you'll miss me too when I'm gone?"

"Meow!"

"Would you like to follow me instead of Ves?"

"..Meow."

Ves immediately sat up straighter in his chair! "Hey, Melinda! Don't steal my cat! He's mine!"

She giggled. "You should learn to share. Besides, I can't take your cat. As you said, he's yours. I wouldn't deprive you of your own family."

After she had her fun, she lifted Lucky away. The cat returned to lounging on the desk.

The two Larkinsons proceeded to chat for a time. They exchanged some stories and talked about their aspirations for the future.

"No offense to you, Ves, but I truly believe in Uncle Ark." She stated. "He's a proven leader and he is willing to do anything to give our Larkinson Family a new home. Compared to the clan, our old family is worse off and needs me more."

"I see. You're right. Our clan is much better off. I suppose you can make a bigger difference to our lineage if you accompany Ark and protect our family members."

"What about you, Ves? I already heard about where you want to take the clan, but I don't quite understand why you are exerting yourself so much. Why are you in such a hurry?"

Though Ves could never possibly tell the truth to her, he still cared enough about Melinda to say at least something to placate her concerns.

"It's.. complicated. I can't really explain myself other than that there is more afoot than what is apparent on the surface. Suffice to say, the disappearance of my father has a lot to do with my actions."

She frowned at this cryptic response. "I see. There's obviously something fishy about all of this, but if you don't want to tell me, I'll respect your decision."

"I'm sorry, Melinda. It would only put you in danger if I told you. Some things just aren't meant to be I guess."

"Are you in danger? Will you be fine without me? If you ever need help, you can always call on me. While I can't do much on my own, I might be able to convince Ark to lend a hand."

"No need." Ves shook his head. "My problems aren't as severe as you think. At the very least, I'm not in imminent danger. I just need to get stronger in order to solve the issues that have been plaguing me for the past few years."

The Mech Designer System, the Five Scrolls Compact and his father's persecution were all issues that Ves was determined to solve. Yet the strength needed to confront them

was so much that he needed to be a Master before he was confident enough to confront the conspiracy that enveloped his parents!

"As long as your goal is just, you will always have my support."

"Thank you. That means a lot to me. I will always keep you in my heart."

The two began to wrap up what might possibly be their final moment together. Both of them stood up and hugged each other once again.

"I don't know where the future will take you, Ves, but if you ever want to return to me, you can likely find me and the rest of the Larkinson Family somewhere in this star cluster."

"I know." Ves smiled. "I have your comm contact. We can always talk over the galactic net. Even the Red Ocean is connected to the same network."

He supposed the name of the galactic net was rather outdated now. Properly speaking, the Comm Consortium should encourage everyone to refer to it as the inter-galactic net.

Still, saying that phrase out loud was a massive bother compared to the term that everyone had already been used to saying for centuries.

In any case, both Larkinsons knew that maintaining contact through the galactic net was anything but ideal. The loss resulting from physical separation was simply insurmountable no matter how much technology was being employed.

As Melinda strode towards the exit, she turned around one last time.

"I have been hearing some mixed stories about you lately. I don't know how much of it is true and what you have been really up to. I hope you take your responsibilities seriously and don't lead your clan astray. I would hate it if you turn into one of the criminals that I used to arrest back when I was a Planetary Guard officer."

Ves awkwardly smiled in return. "I always have the best intentions in mind. As the clan patriarch, there is no way I would ever do anything irresponsible. Rest assured that the Larkinsons who are following me will be well taken care of. Honor is still important to us even if we are no longer part of the old family!"

"I'll hold you to that promise, Ves. Farewell."

The door slid open, allowing Melinda to step out into the corridor.

Once the door slid shut, it was as if a piece of his life had left. Ves sank despondently in his chair as he reflected on his final meeting with his favorite and most supportive cousins in his life.

Was this farewell?

Would Ves ever meet her again?

Would the two of them slowly drift away from each other?

The thought of no longer being able to enjoy a pure, personal moment with Melinda caused his eyes to well with tears.

He went through so many harrowing events since he embarked on his career, yet he never cried. Why was this different? Why did his emotions run out of control in this fashion?

A part of him wanted to run out of the door and reach Melinda in order to convince her to stay! If Ves tried hard enough, he could probably find a way to lure her into the clan!

Yet.. as much as his emotions urged him to do so, he knew it wouldn't be right. Melinda had already made a choice with her mind and heart. The only way he could convince her to change her decision was to distort her decision-making process.

Ves had already done so once to his clan when they hesitated on fully integrating the adopted Larkinsons.

Though the decision seemed to work out so far, Ves was very much aware of the dubious ethics behind his action.

He refused to subject Melinda to such treatment! Even he had limits!

"I'm a mech designer, not a politician! I have morals!" He convinced himself!

"Meow?"

Lucky curiously looked up at his owner. His tail swished in the air while he adopted a skeptical expression.

"It's the truth!"

It took half an hour for Ves to regain his composure. Melinda Larkinson wouldn't be the only person he would say goodbye to in the coming days. There were lots of Larkinsons he would likely never see again unless he decided to return home.

His grandfather was perhaps the Larkinson he cared about the most after his father. Benjamin Larkinson was already old and nearing the end of his life.

While it was no problem for the elder Larkinson to hang on for a decade or so, Ves doubted that his grandfather could live any longer.

"There is no way for me to prolong his life either."

He needed to sacrifice too many merits to prolong the life of a former mech pilot. When he compared the cost to extend the life of his grandfather to the delay he would suffer in setting off his grand expedition, he couldn't justify the tradeoff.

"My grandfather wouldn't want me to sacrifice my dreams to extend his existence. He has already lived a full life!"

### *Chapter 2030 Special Applicant*

As the Larkinsons from both branches continued to mingle with each other, the clan underwent a large reorganization.

After the Battle of Kesseling VIII, the clan suffered a lot of losses. All of those missing positions had to be filled. In fact, the clan also sought to expand its numbers further in order to ensure it had enough strength to face its challengers!

The Larkinson Clan organized a large recruitment event. Any Sentinel or upstanding person could apply to join the clan!

As long as they possessed valuable skills the clan urgently needed, they became eligible to become Larkinsons!

Though this was a rather sudden shift in policy, Ves encouraged it because he was confident that the adoption ritual was sufficient enough to weed out the weak-hearted and treacherous people among the applicants.

The Larkinson Clan had made it very clear that it wasn't offering a regular employment opportunity. Instead, they sought people who knew what they were getting into and were enthusiastic about taking part in all of the wealth and woe of the clan no matter the danger!

Even if the clan listed out an extremely stringent list of demands, the amount of locals applying to join still flooded the administrators assigned to process them! There were far too many Sentinels and other people who heard about the clan and envied the people who became a part of it!

It was an especially attractive offer to the commoners who led regular lives in the Sentinel Kingdom!

To become adopted by a clan known for its wealth, strength and heritage was a dream come true to many locals who once fantasized about becoming nobles.

Though the Sentinel Kingdom occasionally elevated outstanding commoners into the ranks of nobility, that was a pipedream for many ambitious lowborn citizens. The class system in the Sentinel Kingdom was still a fact of life for many people!

Though the commoners of the Sentinel Kingdom were better off than their counterparts in the Vesia Kingdom, they always yearned for more.

This was why the recruitment opportunities of the Larkinson Clan were so significant. Though the foreign clan didn't necessarily equate to a noble house, to the commoners who didn't know any better, they might as well be the same!

In their eyes, the wealth, prestige, honor and heritage of the Larkinsons already elevated them into nobles in every way that mattered!

While the Larkinson Family emphatically did not seek to adopt anyone, the Larkinson Clan was different!

In the eyes of many Sentinels, the clan was rather crazy for opening its gate so wide! Over the course of the next two months, thousands of people would receive the chance to become a Larkinson and thereby turn into 'nobles'! The frenzy the news ignited among the populace was so great that passenger liners were struggling to handle all of the demand for transit to Cinach VI!

Some local powers were pleased at this development. House Evenson, despite failing to arrange a meeting with Ves in person, were ecstatic at all of the attention that Cinach VI received!

Others, particularly its rival houses, were not so pleased to see so many skilled and talented people leave their domains.

The Larkinson Clan didn't pay attention to the sentiment among the nobles. Their strength and the strength of their Hexers escort meant that there was nothing the local nobles could do to pressure the clan into stopping its activities!

So many people applied to the Larkinson Clan these days that the people responsible for vetting the newcomers had to allocate additional personnel to handle the influx!

For a time, Ves tried to evaluate the applications in person, thinking that his implant allowed him to be very efficient at this task.

He soon gave up. When the applications surpassed a hundred-thousand, there was no way he could properly evaluate every individual in a comprehensive manner!

Ves soon decided to leave the matter to the clan and went back to meeting with important Larkinsons and resuming his work on his ongoing projects.

All sorts of weird and peculiar people applied to join the clan.

The handful of members of the old family who looked at the clan and wanted to be a part of it all got in without issue. They were the only exception! Everyone else had to go through the normal process, which entailed successive rounds of inspection in order to filter out the unsuitable!

At a large venue in downtown Torze, hundreds of people were obediently waiting in line to enter the Larkinson Clan's recruitment hall. The hopes and dreams of many commoners rested inside the hall where the Larkinsons in their dashing uniforms evaluated each of them for their skills and temperament!

In fact, the crowd outside the hall would have grown bigger if not for the preselection that took place before. Automated AIs employed by the clan already scanned their applications and records and already filtered out the vast majority.

The ones who didn't make the cut all failed to meet the basic qualifications. Examples included doing badly at school, a history of behavioral problems or a criminal record. Anything that pointed towards trouble or ineptitude need not apply!

AIs couldn't do everything, however. There was always a chance that the application and records contained lies. Even if some mech technician graduated from technical school with excellent grades, they might have forgotten half they learned after a couple of years!

If there was one thing the Larkinson Clan and Ves especially loathed, it was incompetence!

Since so many people wanted to become a part of the clan, the Larkinsons had the luxury of choosing the very best!

Because expanding the Larkinson Clan was a very serious matter, the clansmen assigned to conduct the recruitment event all took their duties seriously. They not only had to verify in person that the applicants actually possessed the skills the clan urgently needed, but also test their personality and temperament to see if they were compatible with the values of the clan!

It was mostly the latter where the applicants received their crushing rejections!

"I'm sorry young lad, but your personality is better served elsewhere." A Larkinson recruiter shook his head.

"What?! Why!" The young man stood up and thumped his fists against the table! "I know starships like the back of my hand! I'm an excellent helmsman! I'm a spaceborn from birth. I studied how to control the complex propulsion systems of trade ships as I grew up and studied interstellar navigation in university!"



The recruiter sighed. He had seen sights like this all the time. On paper, the applicant was highly suitable. Not only was he a well-trained helmsman and navigator, he also possessed a true spaceborn pedigree, which was something the clan desperately needed more of in order to adjust to life in space!

"Your application has already been rejected by us. While it is true that you are very skilled, your personality wouldn't be a good fit with ours. In particular, we don't find you trustworthy enough."

"That's not fair! There is nothing wrong with my behavior! The previous tests didn't indicate any problems!"

Privately, the recruiter knew that was true, but there was one test which the applicant had failed.

It also happened to be the most important test and the entire reason why the aspiring helmsman and navigator had to look for employment elsewhere!

"Do you remember the instance where you were asked to move close to the Bright Warrior we placed inside this hall?"

"Uh, yes?"

"When you touched it, didn't you exhibit a negative reaction?"

"I was just feeling ill or something! I admired that mech! I thought it was very impressive with how it can affect my emotions. Just give me another chance and I'll hold in my reaction!"

The recruiter shook his head. How many times had he heard that excuse. "Sorry. You only have one shot at it. That's the rule."

The applicant completely lost his composure! "That can't be! I behaved so well! I held myself in so hard in order to become a noble! Please give me another chance!"

As soon as the distressed fellow tried to lunge across the desk, his hands brushed against an energy screen.

Soon enough, a zap from a turret hidden in the ceiling stunned his body to paralysis! A bot soon entered the interview room to haul the reject away.

"This is the seventh time today." The Larkinson recruiter sighed.

Ever since the locals got the notion that joining the Larkinson Clan was the same as becoming a noble, they went through extreme measures to cheat and game the tests!

From bringing government officials to alter the records to presenting a false image of themselves as a model employee, none of their efforts succeeded.

This was because they had to go through a hidden 'integrity' test that entailed exposing them directly to the glow of a Bright Warrior!

While the clansmen administering the tests weren't quite sure what was going on, their faith in the Bright Warriors all caused them to trust this procedure. This was especially so after the rejects all exhibited problems that they hadn't shown before when they still had hope!

The next applicant soon entered the room.

Surprisingly, he didn't come alone. Someone else entered as well!

The recruiter frowned. "Applicants are supposed to enter on an individual basis. If it is not your turn, please exit."

"You must be one of the newer Larkinsons, right? I'm Raella Larkinson, an original member of the family. I came to join the clan!"

"Oh." The recruiter's face softened up. "If you are a trueblood Larkinson, then you aren't required to go through this process. You can join the clan right away!"

"I know that. I already received an appointment to the upcoming induction ceremony. I'm here to support my boyfriend instead!" Raella beamed.

The recruiter turned his gaze at the handsome, confident-looking man dressed in a shirt that failed to hide the muscled contours of his chest and abs.

"Mr.. Ricklin." He said, looking up the applicant's record from his terminal. "Hmm. You're young, that's great. Mech pilot. We need those. Former officer with command experience. That's great. Participated in the Sand War and fought in defense of Bentheim. That is an excellent accomplishment! Hm.. it says here that you have brought a large number of subordinates. You do realize that we will have to test them on an individual basis, correct?"

"I know." Vincent lazily waved his hand. "I already told them the score. If they can't pass the tests, they'll just take over my outfit and run it by themselves."

"Very well. We have received multiple instances of people wishing to apply by group, but we don't do that here."

The recruiter went back to studying Vincent's records and test results. His face soon fell. "There are certain red flags in your record. It says here you once fought for an

illegitimate rebel organization and committed acts of murder, sabotage and other assorted terroristic activities."

"I received a pardon for that!" Vincent objected! "The Bright Republic, back when it was still decent, forgave my past deeds! I fought tons of sandmen in order to redeem myself!"

"Vincent is not a bad guy." Raella vouched for her boyfriend.

The recruiter found other warning signs. "It says here that there are several.. irregularities.. with regards to your personality. You are too selfish, narcissistic and immoral!"

Raella shook her head. "Vincent isn't a bastard! He just had a difficult upbringing, that's all! Come on. Give a fellow Larkinson a favor. Just let him through. He can become a great clansman if you give him a chance! Didn't he do well in the remaining tests?"

According to the test results, Vincent didn't elicit any strong reaction from the Bright Warrior. The absence of a negative or positive reaction wasn't necessarily good. The most earnest and capable applicants always received a positive reaction from the mech!

"Besides, I know the big guy in person." Vincent grinned and tapped his comm. A projection of a very masculine-looking mech appeared into view. "I'm one of Ves Larkinson's best buddies, you know! Did you know he and his babe designed the Adonis Colossus for me? I smashed so many sandmen with this mech! I even brought it along with me so I can use this mech to fight alongside other Larkinsons. What do you say? Will you let me into the clan?"

"I'm not sure." The recruiter looked uncertain. "This is outside of protocol. I will need to contact my superior."

"Go ahead. Just mention what I said and I'm sure it will be fine!"

The recruiter privately contacted his superior and passed on the information he received as requested.

The overworked administrator in charge of some of the recruitment process quickly scanned at the information he received.

"Hmm... these red flags can't be ignored, but.. The Adonis Colossus? A mech designed by the clan patriarch in person? Anyone who received his attention must be someone special!"

The fact that Raella Larkinson personally endorsed Vincent Ricklin was also a mark in his favor.

Five minutes later, Vincent Ricklin's application had been approved!