

Mech 1993

Chapter 1993 Smooth Criminal

"I told you so."

His girlfriend didn't hold back in her gloating. She mercilessly grinned at him as he sat defeated behind his terminal. Over a dozen projections of whacky-looking draft designs served as a testament of his failure to find an alternate configuration for his striker mech design.

He spent an entire week on this problem and had nothing to show for it. Every day, he squeezed his creativity to the utmost to design a mech that met all of his requirements. From limbless snake mechs to elaborate dragon mechs, nothing worked out the way he wanted.

His more extreme mech concepts started to stray increasingly further from the norm. He started off with mechs that resembled monstrous alien horrors and ventured into the absurd such as a mech that functioned like a striker mech when oriented to the front and a swordsman mech when oriented to the back!

That last design was his most imaginative and intellectually-demanding work. It had been a very big pain trying to adopt a side-mounded flight system. Even then, it was far too vulnerable to damage no matter how the mech oriented towards the enemy.

To a spaceborn mech, mobility literally stood for life. Without the ability to move, a mech would only be able to float further and further away from the battle with no way to return to its mothership!

His other mech concepts came with their own problems. Each of them exhibited flaws that disqualified them for the market.

Perhaps it might be interesting to adopt them for his own purposes or for a very special commission, but as a product for the market, they were far too exploitable to be put on sale!

His continuous failure spoiled his entire week. Not that the True Believers had already done their best to ruin his mood.

In their last face-to-face meeting, James made it abundantly clear that the New Ylvaine Dynasty no longer centered around him. Instead, the True Believers would start to worship Ves as a god!

No matter how many times Ves denied that he was a god, James outright ignored his claims!

No matter how much he tried to tell the Ylvainans that he didn't want to take part in their nonsense, the gullible cultists went right back to kneeling before an idol fabricated in his image to murmur incomprehensible prayers!

Ves felt as if the Ylvainans had truly gone insane. He truly did not expect the Living Prophet to step back and let someone else become the focus of their faith!

Though Ves dearly wanted to employ more direct means to smack the True Believers out of their undesirable behavior, he refrained from doing so. The True Believers all consisted of the most radical Ylvainans from the Protectorate.

The fanatics were so unflinching in their devotion that even the threat of death wouldn't change their minds!

Of course, if Ves had his way, he would have preferred to kick the Ylvainans from his fleet, but then who would crew his ships? Who would pilot and service a significant portion of his mechs? Who would perform all of the essential functions that kept the LMC in business?

As sordid as it sounded, Ves needed the Ylvainans. As distasteful as their illogical fanaticism appeared, there was at least one benefit to employing cultists.

They were incredibly loyal.

As long as their beliefs aligned with his interests, then they were some of his most loyal and hardworking employees! As someone who values both of these qualities, Ves would be a fool to throw away all of that precious manpower.

Who else could he hire to make up for the loss of thousands of Ylvainans?

Brighters? Aside from the ones who worked for him for a long time, Ves could no longer trust them as readily as before.

Sentinels? They were complete strangers to him. While they were probably harmless, Ves wasn't ready to put them all in charge of critical functions such as running the systems that kept his ships intact!

In the end, he could only choose the least-bad option from a small selection of undesirable options. As creepy as the Ylvainans behaved, Ves at least wouldn't be at risk of getting stabbed in the back! After the latest betrayals, that was a very valuable luxury!

"Ves? Are you still not resigned?" Gloriana asked after her boyfriend fell silent.

"Ah." Ves pulled himself out of his thoughts. "It's okay. I've accepted this outcome. It looks like we're going to design a humanoid striker mech after all. I'm even more appreciative of this form after I've experimented with different mech shapes."

To be honest, he no longer felt bothered by this issue. He was more concerned with how much James actually knew. Ves hadn't told anyone about his escapade where he pretended to be Vulcan! Not even Lucky should be aware of the details of his Mastery experiences!

"Then will you return to contributing to the main project?"

Ves nodded. "Yes. Even though I'm not happy with the compromises we have to make, it's not possible for us to distort reality to get what we want. I guess we have to live with a striker mech with a bit more limitations than I prefer."

"Good." Gloriana dropped her smug attitude and adopted a gentle demeanor. She sat down next to him and pressed her side against his own. "I was in your position once as well, you know. I tried so hard to innovate a better solution than the one the mech industry took for granted. Did you know what I learned? Standards exist for a reason. While there are mech designers out there who are able to break the mold, you have to be really good to come up with something better. If anything, I should be the one who should be tackling these kinds of problems. Your talents lie elsewhere."

"I know my specialties lie elsewhere, but I don't think my efforts have been futile, though. At the very least, this has been an interesting exercise for me. I've gained some useful harvests that will help me in my future progression."

"That sounds great, Ves."

The two fell silent for a moment as they enjoyed each other's body warmth.

"I love you, Ves."

"I love you too, Gloriana."

Though the exchange of words sounded simple, the emotion in their voices conveyed the depths of their affection towards each other!

Both of them knew that despite their differences, despite their disagreements, they could always count on each other for unconditional support!

Gloriana giggled and kissed his cheek!

Ves smiled at that, but then his girlfriend started to lick his skin!

"Gloriana! What did I tell you about licking me? Cut it out! It's too weird!"

"Hihihi! You can't stop me! Your cheek is so smooth and soft. I just love it! Don't ever grow wrinkly, Ves. I would hate to see your smooth cheek ruined!"

What kind of crazy request was that?! "I'll grow a beard!"

"You won't." She confidently smiled. "I like you better when your cheek is smooth. How else can I experience its softness when there's so much hair in the way? You'll keep shaving every day, right? You're already handsome as you are now. I wouldn't ask for anything else!"

"Okay."

Ves did not feel like growing a beard anyway.

They quickly returned to work. Ves had still kept up with the progress done on the striker mech. Even without his contributions, the project still proceeded according to schedule.

Just as Ves immersed himself in a familiar routine, a very major event forced him to exit the design lab!

"Boss!" Gavin called as he entered the design lab! "Good news! The reinforcements sent by the Hexers have finally arrived! The Wodin Dynasty has made good on its word!"

"Finally!"

Both Ves and Gloriana instantly withdrew from their mental design session. Though they had entered into a very good groove, they were very much aware that they were always vulnerable against enemy attacks!

The CRC and the other forces of the Friday Coalition continued to cast a shadow over his fleet. The lack of combat carriers and the substantial amount of casualties his forces suffered in the previous battle had weakened their effective strength to a worrisome level.

Ves had always been afraid that the Friday Coalition would ambush his fleet before it managed to link up with reinforcements!

Fortunately, his fears were unfounded! With Hexer reinforcements, Ves wouldn't be supplementing the defense of his fleet with low-quality mercenaries.

A single second-class mech could easily defeat ten or even a hundred third-class mechs in the right conditions! Though the actual results were a lot more nuanced in practice, even a single mech company of second-class mechs made a huge difference!

Moments later, a small fleet of actual combat carriers closed in on his fleet after verifying each other's identities.

As Ves prepared to meet with the leader of the reinforcements, he received some very alarming news.

"Calabast!? How did you enter my stateroom?!"

"That's not important." She said as her invisibility field faded from her body. "I'm just here to update you on some recent developments. First, remember your obligations?"

"How could I not?" Ves smiled ruefully at her as a grooming bot shaved chin until it was as smooth as a baby's skin. "I'm very grateful to hear that DIVA has managed to rescue the Larkinsons that Spotlight took into custody. I'm eager to see them again once we've reached the Sentinel Kingdom."

"Well, DIVA has expended quite a lot of effort in this rescue operation, and it is looking for compensation. I've made a lot of arrangements behind the scenes. After a lot of wrangling, I managed to convince DIVA to provide you with one of hexism's most valuable relics."

Ves looked surprised. "So soon?"

"What do you mean, so soon? It has already been several weeks! The relic will be delivered to this ship when you meet with the commander of the Penitent Sisters."

"Huh? Could you repeat that, Calabast? I'm afraid I misheard."

A smirk appeared on her face. "The relic you need to design your Hexer mech will be delivered to you in person when the commander of the Penitent Sisters arrives to pledge her allegiance to you! Congratulations, Ves! You are now the owner of another outfit!"

"That.. that's impossible! Aren't they supposed to be the worst man-haters of the Hegemony?! How come they're my reinforcements!?"

What was it about him and fanatics?! It was as if he was a magnet for crazy! Absorbing the True Believers who were too crazy for the Ylvainans was bad enough. Now, if Calabast wasn't joking, he was expected to take over the Penitent Sisters as well!

These were the Hexers who wanted to kill off every boy. They wanted to cleanse human civilization of the male gender so that only women were left to rule over the galaxy!

They were so extreme that even other Hexers rejected their stance!

Calabast crossed her arms. "Look, Ves, it's not as bad as it sounds. They are bringing a total of 600 second-class mechs and mech pilots to the table. Sure, half of them consist of landbound mechs and half of them consist of spaceborn mechs, but that is still a game changer. That is enough to secure us against nearly any kind of Fridayman ambush! The CRC is so occupied with the aftermath of the uprisings in the Ylvaine Protectorate and the devastating losses suffered by the Bright Republic that it is hard for them to muster enough pursuit forces to hunt us down. With the addition of the Penitent Sisters, we no longer have to worry about our safety for the remainder of our journey!"

That sounded very good, if not for the fact that he had to rely on the protection of hundreds of Hexer women who wanted nothing more than to shoot a round through his head!

He didn't believe these extremists denounced their man-hating ways so quickly! Regardless if they went by the name of Penitent Sisters, Ves felt very bad about entrusting the protection of his fleet to a force he wasn't confident in controlling!

Even with the help of the Glory Battalion, his Avatars of Myth and his Living Sentinels were grossly outmatched! Perhaps only the presence of Venerable Brutus was able to constrain them to an extent!

Calabast approached his back and patted him on the shoulder. "There, there, Ves. The Penitent Sisters aren't as scary as you think. They are very much restrained by the rules and oaths they have been forced to accept. Why not meet their commander first before you make your judgement?"

Chapter 1994 Aggrieved Women

The Penitent Sisters ships consisted largely of combat carriers with a handful of transport ships trailing behind.

The quality of their vessels clearly upstaged anything in Ves' fleet aside from the ships of the Glory Battalion!

If that wasn't enough, the Penitent Sisters weren't shy about showing off their might! Almost the entire spaceborn complement of the Sisters emerged from their carriers and formed a huge and imposing formation that silenced everyone in his fleet!

"Almost three-hundred mechs." He viewed the projection of their approach. "All second-class mechs."

Gloriana smiled as she stood by his left. She didn't look nearly as nervous as Ves! "Look closer at the individual machines. While their formation looks impressive at first, the quality of their mechs leave a lot to be desired."

He zoomed in the projection and immediately spotted the telltale marks of frequent repairs and extensive wear and tear.

"These are lastgen mechs, and not just that. They're also rather getting on in years!"

"The Penitent Sisters are meant to pilot designed by boys. Since you decided to stall on the commission, they have to make do with the Hegemony's castoffs instead." Calabast remarked as she stood by his right.

Being flanked by two Hexers made Ves a little nervous. Rather than project an image that he was in charge, he felt as if he was letting his girlfriend and his strategic partner be in charge instead!

"Meow?" Lucky crawled onto his shoulder.

"No, Lucky. You don't get to eat their mechs. Even if they are a bit outdated, they are still competitive machines. For now, we need the strength of these mechs to guard ourselves against Fridaymen aggression."

His cat didn't like that answer. Lucky soon jumped away from his shoulder and floated down to frolick with Clixie.

Ves felt he needed a boost of confidence. He turned around and stretched his hand. "Give me the Larkinson Mandate."

His silent bodyguard obediently passed over the book that was in her care.

The hefty tome landed in his grasp, directly exposing him to the life contained within the intangible space of the ancestral relic.

Nyaaaa.

The Golden Cat looked up at Ves in the spiritual realm.

"Keep an eye on the newcomers we're about to meet. If they present an acute danger to me, please warn me. I trust in your judgement."

Nyaaa. Nyaa!

Ves looked a lot more steady now that he held the book. Goldie's presence and the symbolism of the book infused his spine with a very needed boost of confidence!

Hexers always frustrated him, but he was determined to make sure he ended this meeting on a strong note! He was not about to let these women walk all over him! He was a man, and he wanted to be sure the incoming commander of the Penitent Sisters knew who was in charge!

"What are the conditions for their use?" Ves asked. "Can I organize them however I want?"

"Not exactly. There are a number of strings attached. None of them are too onerous, I assure you." Calabast reassured him. "Let me list them out. First, you have to keep them as a separate entity. That means you can't invite them into the Larkinson Clan."

That point was obviously moot! There was no way Ves would be crazy enough to invite the Penitent Sisters into his clan!

"Second, you will have to replace their mechs with ones designed by you. There's no time limit attached to this condition, but you shouldn't delay this matter for too long. The Temple of Hexism outfitted the Penitent Sisters with outdated mechs for more reasons than to be frugal. They won't last very long."

Great. The advanced state of wear and tear of the Penitent Sister mechs served as an invisible deadline. If Ves hadn't supplied the Sisters with new mechs of his own designs, they wouldn't have any intact mechs to pilot in a couple of years!

"Third, you are responsible for all of their equipment and expenses. While the Hegemony has already covered the cost of acquiring all of the ships, mechs and other equipment, the state will not subsidize the outfit on your behalf."

"That's not a problem. I think I can handle the increased upkeep. If not, I'll just work harder and publish some new designs."

Calabast nodded and raised a fourth finger. "Fourth, treat them with at least some respect. While the Penitent Sisters are regarded as sinners and criminals by the Hegemony, they are still loyal Hexer citizens. Don't mistreat them or deprive them from what they need to sustain themselves and perform their duties. Keep your hands to yourself and be professional! I'll be sure to observe your conduct with them on behalf of the Hegemony to make sure you comply with this directive."

"I'm not that kind of person!" Ves protested.

"You don't have to worry about that, Calabast." His girlfriend spoke from his left side. "With me around, Ves doesn't need another woman, isn't that right? Hihi!"

"Of course."

"Good, because I'll be keeping an eye on you anyway. Don't touch anything you aren't supposed to and I won't chop them off, okay?"

"Gloriana!"

"I was just joking, hihi!" She giggled.

Ves wasn't sure about that, but whatever.

Once the Penitent Sister fleet came within range of his own fleet, a shuttle departed from the flagship, a combat carrier called the Surly Cockatrice.

"You Hexers sure have a wicked sense of humor."

"We try." Calabast smiled. "Hexers aren't as stiff as you imagine. It's not as if Gloriana spends all of her time to think how she can repress boys like you. Mostly."

Gloriana's eyes dreamingly blinked at Ves. "I can spend hours thinking about your smooth and soft face."

"Please be serious. I don't want to give the wrong impression to our latest guest. Since I'm expected to have a working relationship with the Penitent Sisters, we shouldn't joke around too much." Ves coughed.

He had heard quite a bit about the Penitent Sisters, and nothing about their story suggested that they consisted of Hexers who could take a joke!

Ves and his entourage headed down to the Scarlet Rose's hangar bay to greet the new arrival.

Soon enough, an advanced-looking shuttle landed on the designated zone.

The shuttle was coated in a pattern of black and orange, just like all of the mechs and ships of the Penitent Sisters.

The outfit's colors also extended to their uniforms as a number of tall and athletic-looking women emerged from the vehicle!

Ves immediately recognized that these women had undergone the same type of physical and genetic augmentation as Nitaa, but to a much more sophisticated degree!

Whereas his personal bodyguard grew tall and muscled, the approaching Hexers all looked a bit more compact and feminine but by no means weaker!

The women initially marched forward with confidence, but as they recognized Ves and came closer, their steps slowed as if they were unwilling to enter his presence.

The obvious scowls on their faces made it very clear that they did not like him at all!

Ves felt a bit discouraged by the fact that the Penitent Sisters weren't even able to maintain a professional demeanor in front of their new employer.

He understood their predicament a bit, though. Not only were these man-haters forced to repent their radical views, they were also forced to obey his orders! Any Hexer would be mad at these circumstances, let alone the ones who thought that boys weren't worthy enough to be kept alive!

The emblem imposed upon the Penitent Sisters clearly showcased their lack of choice in the matter. The symbol consisted of the classic symbol of Mars in orange adorning a black circle!

The Temple of Hexism might as well have drawn the ♂ symbol directly on their faces!

To bear this mark as the representation of their outfit must feel like a supreme indignity to these Hexers! If he was in their place, he would be angry all the time as well!

In fact, Ves found it surprising that these Penitent Sisters hadn't chafed at their punishment and tried to go rogue. Ves didn't see any obvious signs of enforcers or other means of insuring their compliance.

The small group of women finally stopped before their new employer. They looked at Ves in obvious distaste, but that did not stop them all from bending down to their knees, pressing their fists against their chests and lowering their heads!

"We are the Penitent Sisters. We have accepted exile from the Hexadric Hegemony in order to serve our fellow Hexers in another capacity! We have all taken an oath to serve the boy known as Ves Larkinson! For as long as our pure and unsullied female bodies still draw breath, we shall do our best to atone for our mistakes!"

A pregnant silence stretched after this solemn declaration.

Ves sensed no duplicity in their words. They gave off a similar vibe to Ylvainans crossed with Hexers. The Penitent Sisters were absolutely serious about abiding to the strictures and tenets they believed in. Right now, their strong religious and cultural beliefs strongly discouraged them from evading their punishment!

Rather than feel disturbed at their slavish devotion to their made-up beliefs, Ves instead relaxed a little.

As sad as it sounded, Ves was quite experienced in interacting with religious nuts. He could already tell that the Penitent Sisters largely fell in this category.

"Rise." He spoke with a tone that attempted to convey as much authority as possible. "Please introduce yourselves."

The lead woman with the most impressive-looking epaulets on the shoulder of her uniform rose up first. The woman had shaved the left side of her hair and dyed the other half in stripes of orange and black.

Together with her uniform, it made her look like a giant warning sign.

"I am Commander Valerie Chancy. I lead the Penitent Sisters."

Commander Chancy looked like she was in her fifties, though it was hard for Ves to know for sure due to all of the physical augmentations she went through.

Though she hadn't spoken a lot of words, Ves immediately got a sense he was facing a veteran combat and a person who embodied discipline. She immediately reminded him of the veterans in his own family.

It was too bad the obvious disgust in her eyes and expression betrayed her true thoughts. Even though the commander of the Penitent Sisters was resolved to follow her instructions to the letters, her true thoughts on boys likely remained unchanged!

The other two women looked just as pissed as they introduced themselves.

"Juliet Stameros." A younger woman with the same hairstyle spoke up next. "I am the head designer of the Penitent Sisters. I am in charge of managing the condition of our mechs."

That sounded familiar. Ves would have felt a bit of kinship with Juliet if not for her fire radiating from her eyes!

Another middle-aged woman spoke up after that. "Commodore Abigail Evern. I command the fleet of the Penitent Sisters."

Ves and Gloriana immediately jerked as they heard her name!

"Are you a part of the Evern Matriarchal Dynasty?" Gloriana asked cautiously.

She had a lot of cause for worry! Officially, the Wodins were subordinate to the Everns! The two dynasties essentially shared a vassal-liege relationship!

As if expecting this question, Commodore Evern shook her head. "I have been cast out of the Evern Matriachal Dynasty due to my.. transgressions. Though I have retained the right to carry the Evern name, I am no longer an extension of my old dynasty."

In other words, her status was similar to that of Calabast, but not as pleasant. She obviously sounded aggrieved of this fact. Almost anyone who used to be a part of a very elite family group would feel that way after getting disowned.

All in all, Ves did not have a very good impression of the Penitent Hexers. Even though he only met three of them so far, he doubted that the thousands that made up the entire outfit were any different!

What was Ves supposed to do with these Hexers?