

Mech 1995

Chapter 1995 Resentful Sisters

His fleet was growing bigger and bigger. Ves felt as if he was in the process of accumulating every outcast or exile from the Komodo Star Sector!

So far, his forces consisted of outcast Larkinsons, Brighters who forsook their state to follow him to the Red Ocean, the members of the New Ylvaine Dynasty, the Battle Criers, the Black Cats and now the Penitent Sisters!

It had become increasingly more cumbersome to Ves to manage all of these disparate groups, especially since they were so distinctive and eccentric.

Fortunately, his decision to delegate most of the management to his deputy leaders has worked out so far. He no longer needed to pay any personal attention to the running of his individual groups.

The sudden addition of the Penitent Sisters didn't intimidate him once he got over their rabid anti-boy tendencies.

When Ves, Gloriana, Calabast invited the three representatives of the Hexer outfit to the Scarlet Rose's conference room, the tension between them was palpable.

Commander Valerie Chancy did not do much to restrain her dislike. As the leader of the Penitent Sisters, her open negativity did not reflect very well on her leadership.

Supposedly, the Penitent Sisters disavowed their extremist ways. Ves did not see much repentance in their eyes. Only hatred and disgust welled within their minds.

When Ves inspected them from a spiritual perspective, he saw nothing that made him doubt his initial judgement!

Once everyone sat down, everyone looked at each other in a rather tense standoff.

What Ves found curious was that while the Penitent Sisters directed most of their ire towards Ves, they weren't very happy with Calabast and Gloriana either!

A state as big as the Hexadric Hegemony always contained a lot of internal division. Different interests groups and ideologies often clashed against each other. The Penitent Sisters just happened to be part of a cult that lost a power struggle.

From the looks of it, the extremist Hexers still harbored a grudge against ordinary Hexers!

"Meow."

Lucky glanced vigilantly at the three Penitent Sisters. The gem cat obviously picked up the hostility emanating from the Hexer exiles.

"Miaow."

Clixie was the same. She rested on the conference table in front of Gloriana but her muscles were all tensed up. There was no doubt she would claw out the faces of the Sisters if they posed a threat to her owner!

Ves held the Larkinson Mandate in his hands. He felt a bit more confident and grounded when he held the book.

No matter how much the Penitent Sisters tried to glare him to death, the reassuring glow emanating from the book bolstered his defenses and allowed him to maintain the demeanor of a leader.

Nyaaaa.

The Golden Cat affectionately rubbed against his spiritual presence. The love and trust she held towards him dispelled some of his nervousness.

The others were also affected by Goldie and the Larkinson Mandate.

Gloriana held just as much affection towards the book while Calabast was oddly intrigued by its extraordinary properties.

As for the Penitent Sisters, the longer the silence stretched on, the more the book seemed to magnify in presence.

Though none of the three women possessed spiritual potential, today they became exposed to Ves' characteristic glows for the very first time!

The mechs in the Scarlet Rose's mech hangar and the Larkinson Mandate both caused the women to reevaluate their impression towards their new 'employer'.

"Welcome to my group." Ves eventually spoke once he regained his calm. "While the circumstances surrounding your disposition are unusual, I hope we can maintain a cordial working relationship."

"Let me be honest, 'sir'." Commander Chancy spoke up with her harsh and barely-restrained voice. "None of my sisters want to work for you. If it was up to us, we would rather throw ourselves at the Fridaymen in the frontlines. You robbed us of this chance to redeem our honor."

"Commander, I think you are mistaken about something." Calabast interjected as she crossed her arms. "You are on punishment duty. The opportunity to redeem yourselves

is a privilege, not a right. Whether you deserve absolution or not depends on your sincerity to abide by the terms of your punishments."

Gloriana spoke up as well in her formal tone.

"Serving us is an honor in itself. My boyfriend and I are some of the most prominent young Journeymen of this entire star cluster! It is not a disservice that your Penitent Sisters are assigned to protect us. The more we can work uninterrupted, the more we can contribute to the war effort. In time, I am confident that our mech designs will be able to tip the balance in the Hegemony's favor!"

"We have already managed to do so in the Sand War. It will be no different for the Komodo War." Ves backed up Gloriana's boasts even though he didn't feel so confident himself about her assertion. "The Friday Coalition has already attacked me several times. If you are truly a proponent of the Hegemony, then you should do everything possible to protect us against every threat. With many millions of Hexers mechs clashing against Fridaymen mechs at the frontlines, do you really think your little outfit can shift the outcome of the war? Trust me, the best way you can help your fellow Hexers win the war is to allow us to design our mechs without interference!"

Obviously, his statement didn't sound credible to the Penitent Sisters. While they grudgingly respected Gloriana's ability, they held no good opinion towards male mech designers!

Perhaps in their eyes, allowing Ves to design mechs for the Hex Army was a disaster in the making! Only their oaths and other restrictions prevented them from shooting him to pieces!

While Ves was sure he could count on the Penitent Sisters to abide by their oaths, it was best not to test their limits. He didn't intend to order them around like dogs or squeeze them until there was nothing left.

While it was too much to ask to earn their loyalty, Ves nonetheless wanted to turn the Penitent Sisters into an element he could rely on. Right now, the Glory Battalion had suffered substantial losses and still hadn't replenished all of the mechs it lost at the Battle of Kesseling VIII.

With the loss of so many second-class mechs had always made Ves nervous. Now that his escorts were bolstered by the addition of six-hundred second-class mechs, he had nothing to fear now! The persistent worry that the CRC might try to catch up and intercept his fleet had disappeared now that his forces were ten times more difficult to defeat!

As Head Designer Stameross passed on some files detailing the mech roster of the outfit, Ves was very satisfied with the mechs that joined his fleet's protection detail.

While the Penitent Sisters nominally brought 300 spaceborn mechs and 300 landbound mechs, in practice both mechs were sophisticated enough to operate in any standard environment. Second-class mechs above a certain price point were almost designed to accommodate multiple environments, and this time was no different.

Certainly, on land the landbound mechs could easily crush the relatively more fragile mechs. In space, the spaceborn mechs held an undeniable performance edge against the sluggish landbound mechs.

However, even if the mechs could only exert seventy to eighty percent of their potential in a different environment, that still put them heads and shoulders above any third-class mech!

With so many formidable second-class mechs bolstering his fleet's defenses, Ves was confident he could come out on top against a third-class mech division!

The value of all of this added protection didn't just secure him against the Friday Coalition. Ves also felt much more confident about his relations with other states!

The Penitent Sisters formed a very scary deterrent against betrayal by state actors. Not only was it costly for third-rate states to overcome 600 second-class mechs, but their presence around Ves also signified that he enjoyed solid support from the Hegemony's government!

It couldn't be more clear that messing with him meant messing with the Hexers! Considering the frightening reputation the Hexers accrued over the years, Ves believed that the Penitent Sisters wouldn't even need to fight any battles.

Their presence alone was enough to scare away every opportunist!

As Ves quietly studied the mech roster, he hummed and made some noteworthy observations.

The mechs of the Penitent Sisters mostly consisted of second-hand castoffs. Ves had the impression that Hexer outfits all traded in these machines when they decided to refresh their mech lineup when the new mech generation kicked into gear.

Pretty much every mech consisted of commercial midrange mechs. They lacked the exclusive components, materials and features seen in the mechs fielded by the Hex Army, but Ves already expected that. It was too much to ask for the Hegemony to provide him with their best mechs and tech.

Even so, the Hegemony made sure that Ves didn't get too many goodies. The mechs assigned to the Penitent Sisters were quite worn and exhibited frequent repairs.

They were nearing the end of their effective lifespan. On average, they wouldn't last more than half a decade or so, though that was dependent on many factors.

He looked up from the projected list. "Miss Stameross, how long do you think your maintenance crews can keep the Sister mechs in working condition?"

Though the female mech designer didn't want to answer this question, she wasn't gutsy enough to violate her oath.

She answered his question with gritted teeth.

"I am confident that most mechs will be able to perform reasonably well for at least three or four years. After that, the decay will accelerate and breakdowns will become more frequent. If you refuse to provide us with the funding and materials required to produce replacement parts, then the mechs won't be able to perform up to expectation."

"How well can you service all of your machines?"

"Not that good, 'sir'. While we can effect a lot of repairs in the mech workshops in our combat carriers, we lack a dedicated factory ship or logistics ship. We used to possess an outdated fleet carrier, but the Temple of Hexism took her away from us when we received our latest assignment."

Juliet Stameross resented that, of course. Even a small, sub-capital fleet carrier provided a lot more servicing capacity than a cramped combat carrier that was stuffed with mechs and armor!

The removal of such a valuable fleet asset significantly crippled the outfit's ability to service all of its aging but still sophisticated mechs. None of the mech workshops of his third-class ships were capable of servicing higher-classed machines.

"I'll solve your maintenance problems in time." Ves promised. "The Hegemony wants me to replace your existing mechs with machines of my own design, and I intend to fulfill this obligation."

The faces of all three Penitent Sisters worsened. To them, forcing their mech pilots into the cockpits of mechs designed by boys was one of their worst nightmares!

Though Ves knew that their reaction was anything but encouraging, he didn't take that to heart. This was one of the explicit conditions set by the Temple of Hexism!

After going through the mechs and starships of the Penitent Sisters, Ves had to decide how to manage them. Though Ves was aware that he needed to assert his authority right away, he didn't have the time to micromanage this new outfit.

He made a quick decision.

"Once we reach the Sentinel Kingdom and have the opportunity to settle down, I'll inspect your outfit more thoroughly to enact some necessary changes." He announced. "For the time being, you take orders from Calabast here. Right now, we are still in unfriendly space and the Friday Coalition still poses a threat from us. If you don't want our enemies to have their way, then you should do your best to fall in line and adjust to your new duties. Do you understand?"

"Yes... sir." Commander Chancy practically spat.

How lovely.

"Dismissed."

Chapter 1996 Toasted Relic

The introductory meeting ended shortly after. During the entire discussion, Ves failed to make any headway in reducing hostility of the Penitent Sisters.

Commander Valerie Chancy acted as if staying in the same room as a boy was a huge affront. Her two subordinates exhibited obvious unwillingness to take orders from the male genders.

What rankled Ves the most was the obvious lack of respect he received. To them, his accomplishments and his proven ability to punch the Friday Coalition in the face earned no regard.

They ignored everything about him aside from his gender. This sole trait determined their entire attitude towards him! Ves had a feeling that no matter how hard he tried to play nice with them, he would never be able to flip their attitudes!

Since that was the case, Ves decided to treat them with decidedly less attachment than his other forces. His Avatars, Sentinels and Battle Criers came first.

After the end of the meeting, the three leaders of the Penitent Sisters silently returned to their shuttle. The vehicle swiftly lifted off and flew back to the Surly Cockatrice.

While Gloriana left the conference room in order to resume her work at the design lab, Ves and Calabast stayed a little longer.

Lucky jumped and pounced on the Larkinson Mandate placed on the table.

Nyaaa!

The Golden Cat tried to avoid the gem cat but failed!

"Meow meow!"

Intangible licks started to rake across Goldie's lustrous fur. Lucky was determined to give her another bath!

Ves smiled and watched amusingly as Lucky and Goldie wrestled against each other. Though the ancestral spirit had grown a little stronger, she was far from matching Lucky in terms of size!

"Is there something interesting going on?" Calabast asked as she carefully studied his expression.

"Ah, it's nothing important."

Unlike Ves, Calabast didn't possess any spiritual potential. Even if she did, she still wouldn't be able to observe the Golden Cat.

In some way, Ves believed it was a shame that she lacked this gift. She was already talented and capable as a mortal. How much stronger would she be if she obtained extraordinary assistance?

As Ves faced Calabast's amused expression, he changed his mind.

Maybe it was for the best that Calabast lacked spiritual potential. She would probably be ten times scarier if she possessed superhuman abilities!

"How do you think I handled the Penitent Sisters?" He asked.

"Hmm.." Calabast trailed a finger along her slender forearm. "You should have put your foot down harder. First impressions are important, and I'm not sure the Penitent Sisters realize who is really in charge. While it's understandable that you want to avoid touching their nerves, you shouldn't give them the idea that they can abuse your reticence to their advantage."

Ves dismissively waved his hand. "I don't think that's a big deal. I already have a lot of threats to worry about. I don't want to add another danger to my list."

If necessary, Ves could just treat the latest reinforcements as a temporary buffer. It wasn't necessary to earn their respect or loyalty in order to make effective use of their strength.

Sure, they probably wouldn't fight as hard as if they were truly committed to his cause, but the strength of their second-class mechs and second-class mech pilots was enough to keep him safe for the next couple of years!

Their presence bought him valuable time to transition his own mech forces to an equivalent level of strength. Each week, Ves received reports of another couple of Avatars and Sentinels promoting to a higher class.

Venerable Brutus and a handful of instructors from the Glory Battalion had kept up their tutoring sessions. Even remotely, their insights and lessons were very critical in allowing his mech pilots to recognize their own shortcomings and increase the efficiency of their training!

Five years from now, Ves assumed that most of his mech forces would finish their transition. By then, the relative importance of the Penitent Sisters diminished. Their importance would drop even further if they suffered substantial casualties.

Unlike his other mech forces, there was no way to replenish the ranks of the Penitent Sisters. DIVA and the Hegemony had no plans to dispatch any further reinforcements.

That was okay. Ves already appreciated their gesture.

Ves and Calabast began to discuss how to arrange the Penitent Sisters. They went over how to deploy them in battle and outside of battle. They determined how stern their orders should be and what kind of rules they needed to abide by in order to keep them in line.

This was not a straightforward decision!

Ves prioritized stability while Calabast emphasized control.

An argument threatened to form if Ves didn't propose a compromise.

"I'll let you do it your way for now." He said. "However, the moment we spot any signs that the Penitent Sisters are about to rebel or anything, I'll put a stop to your efforts. Is that clear?"

Calabast chuckled. "It looks like you are becoming more adept at bossing people around. You should adopt this attitude more often. The Penitent Sisters will kneel and weep in front of your feet before long!"

"Urgh, be serious, please. Now, I hope you can keep a close eye on the Penitent Sisters. While they are nominally committed to follow my orders, I'm not entirely sure whether all of the women are resigned to their punishment duty."

"You don't need to tell me what to do. I have already ordered my Black Cats to infiltrate the systems of their ships. I'll be able to observe everything that takes place inside before the end of the month."

She sounded unusually confident, and Ves had no cause to doubt her abilities. Bugging Hexer ships must be as easy as pie to the former DIVA agent.

"There's one thing I'd like you to clarify for me." He said. "What does your state actually expect from me? I doubt it assigned the Penitent Sisters to me because they want to get rid of some undesirables."

His strategic partner offered him a reassuring smile. "It's nothing you already don't know. The Penitent Sisters need to repent by serving under a boy. You happen to be the most suitable candidate, and you also happen to need some reinforcements. How you actually want to make use of them is mostly under your discretion. As long as you treat them as soldiers, you can throw them into battle and use them up as cannon fodder whenever you like."

"Does that mean the matriarchs won't fault me if the Penitent Sisters die out?"

"Ves. Killing them off is sort of the point of their punishment duty. The Hegemony government wants to get rid of them, but refrained from executing them straight away due to the considerable waste that entails. It's better to assign their 600 mech pilots to you and save the Hegemony valuable manpower that it can devote to the frontlines."

"I see. Must the Penitent Sisters die out?"

"Do you sympathize with their fate? Don't be. Their former ideology would have only led the Hexer people to their doom if it was allowed to spread. They don't have any allies. The only reasons why their punishment is a bit more lenient than usual is because their cause was always meant to benefit the Hegemony. They are well-meaning but misguided Hexers who took their extremism too far. If they dedicated themselves to a more moderate school of thought, then they would have become one the Hegemony's most dependable defenders!"

Ves didn't fully buy into Calabast's description of the Penitent Sisters. The women looked anything but 'well-meaning' and their desire to kill off every boy went far beyond being 'misguided'!

In any case, Ves felt a bit more relaxed once he learned he possessed a decent amount of leeway. He didn't have to treat the Penitent Sisters like glass or prioritize their lives over the lives of his loyal subordinates.

"Let's move on." He said. "You said earlier the Penitent Sisters have also brought something essential to me. Does that mean..."

Calabast slowly nodded. "While we were holding our meeting with the leaders of the Penitent Sisters, my agents already took the package from the shuttle. Right now, we placed it in one of the spare storage compartments. Let's go and check it, shall we?"

They stood up and exited the conference room. Ves picked up the Larkinson Mandate, much to Lucky's protests.

"Meow!"

"As you can imagine, it was difficult to secure this package." Calabast told him in a low tone. "Plenty of leaders within DIVA object to your outrageous request, but luckily for you, the matriarchs in charge of running the agency are quite far-sighted. After a lot of searching, we eventually found an object that won't be missed but still fulfills all of the criteria you've set."

"I'm looking forward to seeing what you Hexers managed to scrounge up. I hope it isn't too shabby."

"About that..."

The woman trailed off after they reached the entrance to the storage compartment. Once they entered, a number of black-clothed personnel were sweeping their scanners across a crate. They silently halted their work and drew back at their entry.

Once Calabast came close, she carefully unlocked the lock keeping the metal crate shut.

BEEP.

The crate unlocked and revealed its valuable contents.

Ves looked at the object stored inside the chair-sized crate with a perplexed expression.

"It looks rather.. burned. Is it even complete?"

"This is the only remnant of the Idol of the Superior Mother, a very famed statue that has long been one of the Temple of Hexism's proudest works. At its prime, the statue attracted billions of pilgrims every year. It was especially popular among pregnant women who want to receive some encouragement on raising their children."

"Do you have a depiction of this statue in its prime?"

"Sure."

She projected some archival footage that displayed the statue placed in front of a temple. Large crowds of women respectfully approached it and made their prayers.

It was not difficult to see why the Idol of the Superior Mother attracted so much devotion. Its sculptor managed to craft a metallic statue that shone like shiny marble. The exotics integrated in the work of art caused the statue to glitter across its surface.

To Ves, the statue was very close to reaching masterwork quality! That was an exceptional accomplishment!

The size of the statue was pretty large. It loomed as tall as half a mech.

Compared to the majestic depiction of the Idol of the Superior Mother in its prime, Ves recognized none of it in the scorched and blackened remnant!

In fact, if Calabast didn't point out the piece of debris came from the original statue, Ves would have dismissed it as junk and ordered his crew to chuck it out of the airlock!

"I see why DIVA chose to present me with this object." Ves eventually said. "Where did they steal it from, a forgotten warehouse?"

"Close enough." Calabast shrugged. "That's not important. What matters is that you should be able to find what you are looking for in this piece. Tell me, can you work with this?"

"Can I ask for a refund?"

"No."

"I thought so."

He shrugged and began to inspect the blackened piece of junk in a different fashion. He concentrated his mind and began to inspect the remnant of the relic with his spiritual vision.

Though it was rather difficult to find, Ves did spot some spiritual residue. While the original statue probably accumulated a formidable amount of spiritual accumulation, the event that destroyed the statue probably flung most of it away.

Even so, the residue left within the chunk of debris was stronger than the spiritual energy he found in Ylvaine's nutrient pack wrapper!

"I can work with this." He reluctantly said, much to Calabast's relief. "It's not exactly ideal, but.. let me see if I can adapt it into something useful. I can't guarantee a perfect result, but I should at least be able to attain my goal."