

Chapter 991 Overly Competen

When Ves came back to Leland to ask for additional investigation and monitoring of Chief Nyquist, the intelligence officer did not exactly acquiesce.

"The point of the mission is to find evidence of separatist collaboration in one of our domestic mech companies." Leland reminded Ves. "With the important requirements that it has to be done fast and discreet. Drawing upon too much Flashlight assets will increase the chance of exposure, which will be the end of us and investigation."

Ves frowned. "Is there anything you can do?"

"I can put a tail on him to observe what he does in his off hours. I can also assign an analyst to investigate his background. That's all the assistance I can provide. Can you make do with this help, Ves?"

"It's better than nothing."

Flashlight probably employed hundreds if not thousands of people on Bentheim alone. Yet all Leland could do to help him in this potentially critical mission was to assign two low-level people to investigate Chief Nyquist!

After Leland left, Ves laid down on his bed with a pensive expression. He felt he couldn't complete his mission in the short time remaining. With one-and-a-half weeks to go until he arrived at the deadline, he faced so many constraints that he could hardly move where he wanted to and ask the questions that he wanted answered.

"Fast and discreet. That's impossible."

If they could take their time to investigate the Kadar-Neyvis Group's suspicious activities, then they'd be bound to find a skeleton or two in the company's closet.

If they could perform abrupt raids on their properties and interrogate some of their key personnel, then they could also uncover the company's skeletons through those means.

Yet with neither of those options available to Ves, he felt as if he was bound in place with no way to make any moves.

Ves eventually came to a conclusion.

"If I can't succeed through conventional methods, then I'll just have to cheat."

In fact, Leland already intimated to Ves that he could be more 'creative' about the evidence of enemy collaboration in his report to Flashlight.

While Ves already resolved to do what was best for his career and his company, he still held some misgivings on this course of action.

He would much prefer to avoid this option unless he had no other choice.

Therefore, Ves reluctantly put it aside and tried to figure out other ways to solve the problem.

Perhaps... he might be able to find a way if he reunited with the System!

While Ves didn't dare to carry around the System while he served with the Flagrant Vandals, now that he returned to Bentheim, what stopped him from summoning Lucky and the comm that held the System wrapped around his neck like a collar?

Yet Ves quickly shook his head. "The risks are too great."

Bentheim possessed too many eyes and ears. Leland also indirectly told him that he was under constant surveillance whenever he stayed in public and in areas friendly to Flashlight.

In effect, that meant that he constantly risked exposure no matter where he went if he ever used the System, especially to achieve eye-catching effects.

He couldn't even rule out that even now, some agent of Flashlight was monitoring him right now under stealth!

Struck with paranoia, Ves quietly concentrated his mind and began to engage his sixth sense. Finding nothing amiss, he became a little bolder and swept his quarters with tentacles extending from the ephemeral cloud of Spirituality in his mind.

Nothing.

That did not entirely reassure Ves. Normal people did not possess strong spirits that could interact with reality, and Ves did not know whether his Spirituality was sensitive enough to pick up their presence.

Suffused with paranoia, Ves couldn't find it in himself to relax and rest. After a while, he raised himself from his bed and sat behind his terminal.

In any case, he could easily go without sleep for a week, especially after his additional physiological enhancements. Since time was running short, Ves found it pointless to waste valuable hours to maintain a normal human rhythm.

He idly browsed the galactic net, checking up on the war but finding surprisingly little reliable information. The sentiment among the citizens of the Bright Republic grew more pessimistic due to the mounting casualties and the lack of success in dislodging the Vesians from their newly conquered star systems.

As he read back on some of the major battles of the current war, he couldn't help but grow a little cynical. He never did get a solid answer on whether the Bright-Vesia Wars was a sham.

What was the point of this war? To settle grievances that began during the founding of these two states? To avenge the fallen of the previous wars? To settle geopolitical tensions?

All of those reasons seemed distant and pale. To the average Brighter, they just fought against the Vesians because they tried to invade them every generation. As for the Vesians, both their lower and upper classes always hungered for territory and military exploits to further their careers and domestic ambitions.

"To most of us, the wars are real enough. Just the deepening hatred between our two states has grown too heated."

After a largely fruitless trawl through the galactic net, Ves resumed his investigation for the next few days. He revisited the Ansel and Haston Complexes in order to uncover anything amiss. While he found several points that he wished to study further, his cover role didn't allow him to do so without drawing suspicion.

Everywhere he went, either Jeff or some other goon from the KNG followed him around. Nothing Ves did ever escaped their eyes.

Many times, Ves just wanted to shed all pretences and turn over every rock the company placed to hide their shady activities.

As a mech designer well-versed in the production of mechs, his knowledge and experience both helped him map out where unregistered mechs and parts were being built and sent. Yet even if he knew or strongly suspected such activities, what could he do? As a liaison, it wasn't in his power to call these kinds of activities out. Preparing tribute to the Peace Association wasn't suspicious in itself.

Ves needed to uncover more concrete proof.

While a couple of people continued to look into Chief Nyquist, Ves deliberately cut short his visits to the Mosville Complex. Instead, he began to spend more time at the Ansel Complex.

Not only was this the site where the KNG produced its vital spaceborn mech designs, Ves also had a feeling that something significant went on here. Though it was only his intuition that warned him of something out of sight, as he spent more time here he slowly figured why he felt uneasy here.

Some of the Ansel mech technicians were too competent.

It sounded strange. The technical schools brought up some of the best mech technicians in the Bright Republic. Their proximity and partnership with the Ansel University of Mech Design insured that any mech technician that graduated from Ansel would be the perfect worker for any mech designer.

Therefore, the Ansel mech technicians were clearly a cut above.

However, no matter how talented a mech technician became, they could never match the depth of knowledge and theoretical know-how of a mech designer.

Having worked alongside many different kinds of mech technicians with the Whalers, the Blood Claws, the Mech Corps proper and a deviant mech regiment such as the Flagrant Vandals, Ves witnessed almost every variety of mech technician that the Bright Republic had to offer.

Certainly, the high-quality mech technicians from Ansel was still somewhat new to Ves, but even so, their competence should have limits!

"People who are too good to be mech technicians can easily opt to study mech design instead."

The barrier to entry to study mech design didn't pose too much hindrance to those determined to become a mech designer. As long as any decent student was good in math and science, they didn't need to go through much to get accepted.

Many people including Ves actually thought that the barrier to entry was far too low. Too many institutions pumped out too many mech designers each year, far more than the market could accommodate.

Yet despite how overcrowded the mech industry became, people always dreamed of making it big.

Therefore, the competence of mech technicians always came up to a hard limit. The career of a mech designer was far more glamorous than a mech technician. Even if they failed, their starting point as a mech designer allowed them to get much better jobs than any mech technician.

Therefore, Ves found it slightly weird that some of the mech technicians employed by the KNG in their Ansel Complex showed skill above the realm of their profession.

It didn't make any sense. Where did they come from, and how come they were content to work as average mech technicians in a boring place like this?

Ves only caught the discrepancies due to his familiarity with mech technicians of many different stripes. The average person or mech designer who mostly spent their time at work in a design lab wouldn't be able to sense the subtle differences.

The more time he spent here, the more these differences became apparent. While not a lot of mech technicians showed extra ability, they nonetheless held vital responsibilities within the plant.

However, the KNG openly treated them as normal mech technicians, not even elevating them to chief technicians which they ought to have become.

All of these questions in his mind continued to build up, but he couldn't voice them to Jeff or any of the managers at the Ansel Complex without drawing suspicion.

He needed to find their origin in another way.

Yet every other way demanded too much time or drew too much suspicion.

Ves felt as if every possible direction had been blocked off by some reason or another.

He began to hate this mission.

With time beginning to grow short, Ves felt more and more pressure to begin writing up a report where he creatively included some controversial claims. No matter how shocking and unlikely his fabrications sounded, the fact that they came from him, a member of the reputable Larkinson family and a decorated mech designer, already furthered Flashlight's political aims.

He realized why he felt so deeply uncomfortable about the act of fabricating evidence.

He would let his family down.

More than that, by abusing the credibility that the Larkinsons built up for so long, he would inflict untold damage to their reputation.

His recent meeting with Melinda only emphasized the current differences between a crooked mech designer like him and a straight-laced mech officer like her. Rather than regarding Melinda as an aberration, it was actually him that had deviated from the Larkinsons!

While Ves hadn't spent much time among the adults of the Larkinson Family, he knew that they were mostly simple mech pilots or norms pursuing boring civilian jobs. Even the highest ranking Larkinsons such as uncle Ark or grandfather Benjamin never showed an impropriety during their long careers.

Now that he thought about it, Ves found it rather strange. Why did the Larkinsons insist on staying honest in a society where nobody played fair?

"This is why the Larkinson Family never became big despite how much we've contributed to the Mech Corps."

Yet being a Larkinson himself, Ves also kind of understood why none of the Larkinsons ever reached beyond their means. They were perfectly content with their current role. Trying to hog for more power wasn't always a good thing, because the games people played at that level was incredibly risky.

"Families rise and fall all the time. It's admirable for the Larkinson Family to maintain the same height since the founding of the Bright Republic."

Integrity wasn't necessarily a bad thing. It gave the Larkinsons a trustworthy reputation, and while they would never climb up the upper reins of power, it provided valuable long-term stability to the family as a whole.

No matter what Ves thought of himself, he was still a Larkinson. Everything he did reflected back on his family in some way. Sure, he didn't feel much of a burden when he exploited some advantages through crooked means, but it was a different story if he implicated the rest of his family.

Therefore, Ves really didn't want to fabricate evidence. It wouldn't necessarily hurt him, but it would be stabbing the Larkinsons in the back.

"I need to find another solution."

Chapter 992 Cover Story

As time began to run out, Ves only came up with two strong leads that he felt might definitely lead to something that Flashlight would be pleased with. While he hadn't made much progress on figuring out why Ansel employed overly competent mech technicians, Leland did return one day with a much thicker set of documents.

"This is everything we can dig up about Chief Nyquist on short notice. Overall, his life isn't too remarkable for a military veteran. However, we did find

something notable about him when we tracked down his former colleagues when he served with the Sparky Nuts."

"Oh?" Ves turned to Leland. His case officer wouldn't say anything if he didn't find it important. "Did you find something connecting him to the BLM?"

"Not as such. Instead, when we pried open the lips of one of his old buddies, they mentioned a very important detail that is missing in his record. He had a wife."

"What?! How come his record states that he never married?!"

In fact, Ves already found it rather questionable why Chief Nyquist never married after he returned from the war. The man did not even have a single girlfriend even though he should have appealed to many women with his military background and his stable, well-paying career at the KNG.

"His 'wife' was another mech technician on the same combat carrier he once served aboard. They both shacked up and tied the knot in an unofficial ceremony."

Ves understood now. "Fraternization is forbidden by the Mech Corps, but a lot of servicemen do it anyway."

"That's the practical truth." Leland smiled wryly. "Don't you think that Flashlight or the Mech Corps doesn't know what's going on? The monitoring systems alone catch thousands of intimate encounters aboard the ships every single day. Yet you never hear about anyone getting court-martialed over this offense. Do you know why?"

"Because they're just being humans. Love and affection isn't something which you can stop." Ves quickly concluded.

"Controversy over the regulations on fraternization has existed for thousands of years. In general, a military force operates better with them in place than

without. Even so, we don't crack down too hard on this behavior as long as it doesn't affect the fighting strength of our units. Only the most egregious cases where a superior abuses his power to coerce someone in a relationship are addressed."

"So Nyquist used to have an intimate relationship with a fellow mech technician and the Sparky Nuts did nothing to stop it." Ves repeated. He began to feel some *deja vu*. "Don't tell me his secret wife got killed?"

"Killed in action. There's no ambiguity about it. She was one of the many confirmed casualties of the previous war." Leland stated unemotionally. "This affected Nyquist's performance for a while, but the war ended quickly before his slide became noticeable. He quit the Mech Corps shortly after to pursue a civilian career."

Ves closed his eyes and recalled the last time he met a widower who lost his unofficial wife due to battle.

Recalling how the grieving and unhinged Davis Sollerant pulled out a gun and shot at Ves' face made him shudder in unease. If not for wearing his Squalon armor, he wouldn't have brushed off the assassination attempt as an exercise in futility.

The Flagrant Vandals were all lucky that someone maddened with grief and loss like Davis acted impulsively rather than with deliberate calculation.

Yet what if they did the latter instead of the former? Those who lost the loves of their lives and never got over it couldn't be judged with common sense.

What would Ves do if he was in the same position? Would he hate the Vesians for taking away his lover, or would he be like Davis Sollerant and blame his own side instead for recklessly endangering his wife?

"What a huge mess." He uttered.

"Not necessarily." Leland nodded calmly. "Thousands of widowers emerge after the end of each war. Most of them are able to cope with their losses and restart their lives. From what the Mech Corps has observed of Chief Nyquist, he has never showed any animosity towards the Republic."

"Maybe he's hiding it well."

"Even so, more than twenty years have passed without incident. While that doesn't rule out anything, most people aren't that patient if they wanted to take revenge."

While Leland didn't read too much on Chief Nyquist's love life, Ves couldn't help but keep recalling the example of Davis Sollerant. Perhaps it was just his personal experiences biasing his judgement, but he felt that this detail about the chief technician's life was a critical clue!

However, even if Ves believed that Chief Nyquist held a lot of resentment against the Bright Republic for allowing his unofficial wife to be killed in action, this detail only provided a motive at best. It was hardly the smoking gun that Ves could use to prove impropriety at the KNG.

"Has the tail assigned to follow Nyquist found out anything of note?" He asked.

"No. Chief Nyquist works long hours at the Mosville Complex and only goes home to sleep. Occasionally, he gathers together with some fellow veterans and co-workers at a local bar, but other than that he's thrown himself in his work."

Such a boring pattern left very little clues to anyone keeping an eye on him. Even without Leland mentioning it, Ves already knew there was no point in following Nyquist around if he was determined to maintain a low profile.

"I think it's best if you put the tailing agent on his drinking buddies." He suggested. "Nyquist is way to vigilant and hardly exposes any openings for us to find fault."

Leland nodded in agreement. "That's reasonable, but it's highly likely you won't find anything. None of his drinking buddies possess sketchy backgrounds."

"It's better than nothing."

Right now, Ves gained a slight sense of progression in his investigation. It was nothing to go on as of yet, but it confirmed his feeling that Chief Nyquist was a person of interest.

The next day, he resumed observing the operations at the Ansel Complex instead of the Mosville Complex. He couldn't approach Nyquist directly without setting off alarm bells, so he basically bet on Flashlight's investigator to find out if his drinking buddies were involved with anything problematic.

In any case, in the name of inspecting the quality of the military mech production for mech regiments such as the Volari Starkhawks, Ves began to take a more hands-on approach in his inspection there. He stayed away from the KNG's commercial mech production but deliberately got close to the sections where all the military spaceborn mechs took shape.

He began to interact with the mech technicians assigned to their production. Openly, he displayed nothing but diligence in his cover role as a liaison mech designer. He asked pertinent questions, offered some advice in his perspective and generally found it reassuring that the KNG never fudged the production.

Even so, Ves couldn't help but find some of the oddly competent mech technicians to be a little fishy. The more he interacted with them, the more he felt how out of place they seemed.

Only a handful of these strange mech technicians were assigned to the production of military mechs. Most of them had been assigned to work on the more profitable and therefore more vital commercial spaceborn mechs.

"They're all Kadar loyalists as well it seems."

Different from Chief Nyquist who came from the Neyvis side of the mech company, the Kadar workers from before the merger held themselves to a higher standard. This was mainly because they worked on more expensive machines with slightly higher profit margins.

Right now, the KNG's murky finances made it difficult for Ves to figure out how much money they were losing. However, Ves already vaguely figured out that their spaceborn mech sales helped compensate for the serious losses their frontline mech sales accrued.

In fact, now that Ves noticed the discrepancy, he noted faintly that the Kadar workers resented the Neyvis side of the company for dragging down their financial stability.

"The merger isn't as seamless as it appears."

Perhaps Estella Kadar and Antoine Neyvis may have become a happy couple, but that didn't mean their employees felt as enthusiastic about uniting their companies.

Ves already knew that mergers often led to failure as the merged entity couldn't completely resolve all the incompatibilities or failed to settle on their new identity. The KNG's merger hadn't led to any extreme setbacks, yet some of the underlying differences still remained.

Unfortunately, none of that had to do with the overly competent mech technicians. Ves found out that all of them had been recent hires from the Ansel technical schools. In fact, many of the mech technicians here were already familiar with each other from their school days.

That shot down his theory that they were secret mech designers pretending to be simple mech technicians.

"What is up with them, then?"

Even as genuine mech technicians, they were far too good to work in a normal manufacturing complex!

With time running out, Ves felt he needed to do something more drastic. When he met up with Leland, he demanded something extreme.

"Do you remember what I told you about those suspiciously good mech technicians at the Ansel Complex? I'm not getting anywhere by hanging out with them at work. There's something fishy about them, and I need to question them more directly."

"What is it you're asking of me, Ves?"

"Help me interrogate them." Ves declared. "We need to take the direct approach and kidnap them and take them somewhere quietly so I can ask the questions that need answering."

Leland immediately shook his head. "That's way too loud, Ves. There is no way we can hide all of our traces from the KNG. They will know if something has happened to their own men."

"We only need to do it once. Accidents happen. As long as it doesn't occur twice, it's just a coincidence. The KNG employs thousands of mech technicians. They won't notice anything amiss from a single absence."

"Even so, that is a risk that we can't take. Flashlight's involvement might get exposed, and if there is one objective we have to fulfill at all costs, it is to keep that a secret!"

Ves turned around to Leland and began to stare at him intensely to the point of mustering up his concentration to blast his case officer with focused waves of Spirituality.

Even though it shouldn't do anything to a norm, perhaps some vestigial spiritual sense in Leland grew uncomfortable. That, combined with the intense stare, put the intelligence officer under faint pressure.

"Isn't Flashlight allowed to do whatever it wants? Right now, there is an obviously suspicious lead in front of me, but I need to go further if I want to get anything concrete out of it. Even if the interrogation doesn't lead to any explosive revelations, I'll always be able to distort what little we do manage to find out into a bigger problem for the KNG when it comes down to it. A lie with a kernel of truth at its basis is a lot more convincing than a total fabrication."

Perhaps that last argument persuaded Leland a little, because he buckled in the end. "Fine. I'll see what I can do. I'll prepare the backup strike team to pick up an individual of your choosing to take into custody. The preparation will take at least a day because we need to prepare a cover story for that individual's disposal."

"You're going to kill him after we're done?" Ves suddenly frowned. "Don't you have mind-altering drugs that can make someone forget what happened on that day or something?"

"We do, but they leave distinct traces behind. There is no way we can prevent the KNG from growing suspicious if one of their employees is met with a mishap. It's much safer for all of us if we get rid of this loose end in the most direct fashion possible."

Ves found it rather eery that Leland showed no remorse or hesitation about disposing a loyal Brighter. "There is no option to keeping him alive? Why not put him into a coma for a few years?"

"Don't kid yourself, Ves. Every condition that incapacitates someone can be reversed. Flashlight cannot afford to leave behind any living witnesses."

Leland said with a tone of finality before taking a lighter tone. "Luckily, deadly incidents constantly take place on Bentheim. From shuttle crashes, rampaging mechs, gang shootings and terrorist attacks, it's trivial to dispose of someone who knows too much. It'll be even more believable if more people die as well."

This time, Ves couldn't help but stare at Leland with shock! In the name of secrecy, Flashlight would even be willing to kill innocent bystanders if it helped sell their cover stories!

Chapter 993 Sebastian Rohill

The arrow had already left the bow. Now that Ves threw out his request, Leland enthusiastically began to put the pieces together for the kidnapping and disposal operation.

While Ves only requested the kidnapping, the Leland insisted on the disposal part in order to cut off any loose ends.

Even though Ves had half a mind to cancel the request, the intelligence officer fully bought into his arguments as to why they needed to interrogate one of the mech technicians working at the Ansel Complex.

Ves truly needed to ask some questions. He just felt uneasy about the price to accomplish this without drawing any suspicion from the KNG.

After spending a lot of time around Flashlight's people, he should have been more cognizant of their modus operandi. Prizing secrecy at all costs, they weren't above dirtying their hands as long as they achieved their goals!

It made him wonder who Flashlight answered to. Which government official or institution did they have to account for their many shady activities?

To Ves, it seemed as if Flashlight did a lot of dirty things off the record. They couldn't be held accountable for their misdeeds if no one caught them in the act. Perhaps this was why Flashlight prioritized secrecy to the extreme!

They just wanted to cover their own butts, nothing more and nothing less!

It shouldn't have surprised Ves that Flashlight was no less self-serving than the other tainted institutions of the Bright Republic. The Ministry of Economic Development, Spot, the Bright Senate and so on all prioritized their own interests over their public duty.

Ves even began to doubt this mission had any relation to Spotlight in the first place. Did Spotlight and Flashlight really obtained word about possible separatist activity at the KNG, or did Flashlight target them for an unrelated reason from the start?

Right now, the latter possibility seemed more likely. It would be just like Flashlight to pick out a random functioning and highly productive company as a victim for their political crusade.

As for the reason why Flashlight picked the KNG specifically, Ves found many possible reasons.

First, the KNG was intricately tied with the Ansel University of Mech Design. That prestigious school held a lot of sway among the upper ranks of the Bright Republic's mech designers. Taking them down a notch by crucifying some of their prominent alumni would temper their arrogance, as Leland already stated.

The second reason was that while the KNG was a big mech manufacturer with an even bigger impact in the industry, they weren't too big to fail. Unlike some other monolithic companies, the KNG competed in markets with plenty of competitors to fill the gap if they ever abruptly closed their doors.

As for their military production, it would hurt the Volari Starkhawks and the other mech regiments to lose their fixed suppliers of mechs and parts. Yet this pain would only last for a few months before they partnered up with another company.

The KNG's many connections would all be implicated by this company's decline or fall, doing untold harm to many different people. Yet as long as the Bright Republic itself could endure damage, Flashlight wouldn't shy away from engineering such an event.

Perhaps they slept easier at the thought that the Bright Republic needed such a shock to prod the other institutions into working more sincerely. Or maybe Flashlight simply wanted to damage an arm of one of their rival organizations.

All of these cynical didn't get him anywhere, so Ves quickly pushed them out of his mind. No matter what, working with Flashlight at least allowed him to get on their side. In exchange for getting on board their train, Ves would at least be able to insulate himself from these kinds of incidents to an extent.

The Kadar-Neyvis Group, for all of their connections, didn't deter Flashlight at all. They might have even dragged the mech company into the military intelligence agency's crosshairs in the first place!

"Every organization has enemies."

The more friends you made, the more enemies you incurred. That seemed to describe the KNG's current predicament. All of their backing offered no protection against an enemy determined enough to take them down such as Flashlight.

"Maybe the Larkinson Family is wise to remain beneath their attention."

With their clean reputation and honorable service, the Larkinsons never faced any threats from within the Republic that they needed to be concerned about. Certainly, they had rivals and enemies, but none of them played on this level

where the ruining of a large and successful mech company was just another tuesday for the big players!

"Unfortunately, I'm already in too deep to get out. I also have to pick a side if I want to get ahead."

The earlier argument he came up with to collaborate with Flashlight still applied. Compared to the Ministry of Economic Development which supervised so many companies that they couldn't even offer effective to the KNG, partnering up with Flashlight sounded like a better deal.

They were dangerous, for sure, but Ves would rather be on their side than align himself with their enemies!

As Ves performed some research from his terminal throughout the night, Leland returned to his quarters in the next morning.

"Get up, Ves. It's showtime."

"What?" He looked surprised. "Is it already done?"

"Yup. It took shorter than I thought to arrange all of the pieces of the plan. Flashlight is already very practiced in these kinds of ops so I only had to borrow some of their existing infrastructure and assets to cover every aspect. We've already caught the mech technician you wanted. If we go now and interrogate him, we can dispose of him before the afternoon and minimize the time he spent missing at the KNG."

Both of them moved quickly. This time, they didn't take a normal exit but rather left the quarters through an underground tunnel. It was through this passage that Leland could sneak in and out of the military base without being observed by anyone else.

At the end of the tunnel was a small underground hall where an unobtrusive-looking aircar with opaque windows greeted them. Once they entered, the vehicle automatically set off to a destination at the outskirts of Mosville.

There, the aircar entered a garage of an office building under construction. No work was being done today so Ves and Leland met no one else before they arrived at an unfinished underground floor.

Leland led them through the dark with only the light from his comm illuminating their passage. They came up to a reinforced door that was flanked by two burly operatives carrying weapons.

"These are two of the members of the strike team that is backing you up." He said. "I'd normally like to introduce them to you, but the less you know, the better you're off."

Ves gave him a bitter smile. "I am aware."

The two operatives silently allowed them to enter. Inside, the hollow room had been arranged in a familiar arrangement. A simple table rested in the center. Behind it, a drugged and sedated mech technician sat shackled to his metal chair. On the other end of the table sat a single seat.

"You should take a seat, Ves. I'll be standing at the side. For now, you'll be asking the questions."

"Okay."

Having been on both ends of an interrogation, Ves was already somewhat familiar with the dynamic. As the person asking the questions, he needed to get the person providing the answers to take him seriously.

Seeing as how his earlier trick against Leland seemed to achieve some results, if only tentatively, Ves concentrated his mind yet again. "Wake him up, please."

Leland pressed a button on his comm, causing some hidden module placed against the mech technician's skin to inject a substance in his bloodstream.

The kidnapped worker for the KNG abruptly shook off the drugs clouding his mind. "What the.. Where am I?"

"Sebastian Rohill." Ves spoke with command. His Spirituality echoed with his words. He belatedly caught the kidnapped man's attention. "You are in trouble, Stan. Do you mind if I call you that?"

Stan still seemed woozy from the drugs pumping into his bloodstream. Leland already mentioned that the various chemicals would make him more susceptible to answering his question at the cost of his lucidity.

It seemed the elephants pounding inside Stan's consciousness also caused the Spirituality trying to affect him to be completely ignored.

Ves only shrugged at that but maintained the effect in case it might give Stan a helpful push. In any case, it didn't take too much effort for him to maintain his concentration.

"This.. why am I not at work? I'm supposed to be at work!"

As Stan sobered up a bit, he finally realized his predicament. It didn't help that this barren and cold room seemed straight out of some crime drama.

"Where am I! Who are you?! Wait, I recognize you! You're Ves Larkinson!"

Neither Ves nor Leland did anything to hide their faces. As Ves already spent a lot of time at the Ansel Complex, most of the workers there knew who he was. Now that Stan called him out by name, Ves already knew that there was no way for this fellow to survive the day.

Even if Flashlight didn't clean him up, Ves would have done it himself. He closed his eyes for a bit in resignation before opening them up again with greater concentration.

In order to make this dirty business worth it, Ves needed to succeed in extracting useful information out of his victim!

"Stan. As a liaison, I am not only charged with supervising military production at the KNG. I'm also tasked with digging out any improprieties. I'm sorry to say that your suspicious behavior has caught my attention. We know you are hiding something."

Ves spoke that last words while resonating with his own Spirituality, momentarily giving them more force.

"How can that be?!" Stan grew panicked. Perhaps the strong waves of that last phrase impacted him a bit, because the mech technician never questioned Ves' claims. "I have always worked hard for the company! I'm one of the best-performing mech technicians at the Ansel Complex! I'm due for a promotion!"

"It is exactly because you are so good that you have drawn our suspicions!" Ves retorted back. "There are limits to mech technicians and you have exceeded everyone of them. Someone as good as you should have been a mech designer. Why are you pretending to be a mech technician?!"

"That-that-that I am just a good study!"

"Nonsense! You were never good in school in your early years! You barely crawled your way into one of Ansel's technical schools, whereupon you somehow shaped up and became a qualific mech technician, but even then nothing about your school record suggests you're a prodigy!"

"I just became better at my job with the help of the KNG, alright?! They take care of us and helps us with our studies!"

"Again, that's complete nonsense. A mediocre learner would never make the amount of progress you've achieved in so little time. You have to be as good

as a mech designer to do so, but you are definitely not smart enough to be a mech designer, at least normally! So tell me, Stan, what is your secret?"

The man shook in his seat and darted his eyes towards Ves and Leland and back again several times in a row. Ves didn't say anything but kept pushing his Spirituality towards Stan to pile up the pressure.

While it didn't appear the effect was as remarkable as being subjected to the force of will of an expert mech pilot, Ves nonetheless felt as if he did manage to achieve some effects.

One of the reasons why Ves picked Stan out in the first place was that he seemed most susceptible to pressure. The man already acted a bit nervously at work. He pushed himself harder than anyone else, as if he was desperate to gain a promotion.

A quiet minute passed by while nobody said anything to Stan. His nervousness combined with the drugs affecting his mind practically did most of the work in wearing him down.

Ves only offered a coy smile to Stan, as if he already knew what dirty little secret the man really hid. It was the kind of smile that gave the illusion that Ves had everything in control.

"Alright alright! I'll tell you!" Stan finally cracked. "I am taking Enoncolantis-3, alright?!"

This caused Ves to blink and interrupt his intimidating act.

"Enoncolantis-3 is a mental performance-enhancing stimulant." Leland explained, catching his confusion at the strange answer. "It's one of the more obscure stimulants you can find in the black markets because it's fairly expensive. The upside is that in pill form, it enhances someone's cognitive functions for at least half a day. It's also quite troublesome to detect by most scanners, so it is in high demand to many workers!"

So that was what Stan always seemed jittery! He was a substance abuser!

Chapter 994 Toxic Expectations

Substance abuse existed for a long time. It still happened at an alarming frequency even during the Age of Mechs despite many, many measures in trying to stamp it out.

These days, the focus on the use of stimulants and drugs mainly fell into two categories: recreational substances and performance-enhancing substances.

Leaving aside the strong demand for recreational substances, many humans constantly made use of performance-enhancing stimulants in their daily lives.

From cramming for an upcoming exam, to performing more vigorously at work, performance-enhancing stimulants filled a very desperate need to humans who ordinarily lacked confidence.

To Ves, it sounded like a sad occurrence, but it wasn't necessarily a bad tradeoff for their users. By absorbing a potent stimulant, they could temporarily boost their performance in their studies or their work for a critical event.

As for the cost and side effects? As long as someone only used it for a short time when they really needed it, then they were acceptable prices to pay.

In exchange for credits and some negative impacts on someone's health, they could achieve a critical chance to elevate their lives! From students trying to pass an entrance exam for a prestigious university to employees trying to pass through crunch time where work piled up for days, as long as they made use of a quick boost, they would all be able to further their careers!

"Substance abuse, huh?" Ves muttered after his surprise faded away.

He personally witnessed several instances of someone growing too reliant on performance-enhancing stimulants. Back when he studied mech design at

Rittersberg, there were many students who failed to keep up with their courses.

To these marginal cases who were at the cusp of failure, just a simple stimulant gave them a lifeline that allowed them to pass their exams and continue their studies.

Yet a stimulant only lasted a few hours to a day at most. What then? Those who managed to pass an exam only passed a single hurdle at a single instant of time.

In order for anyone to obtain a degree in mech design, they needed to study for at least five years while and pass dozens of exams! That also didn't include the constant assignments and practical work that every aspiring mech designer needed to perform continuously!

Therefore, one stimulant was never enough.

Ten stimulants was never enough.

A hundred stimulants was never enough.

Someone who depended solely on performance-enhancing stimulants to perform adequately in their studies should not be qualified at all!

His university never bothered to screen out these edge cases. That was because after months or years of increasing use of these kinds of stimulants eventually led to self-destruction.

Usually, the substance abusers built up some sort of tolerance that made these drugs less effective. This pushed them into increasing their dose. When that didn't help, they resorted to more potent substances, which usually came with much heavier adverse side effects! This pattern repeated over and over until finally their bodies and minds became too damaged for them to function normally!

Ves thanked his luck that he was intelligent and motivated enough to study mech design at Rittersberg without having to resort to such desperate means.

Yet many people who faced a difficult choice might have made a different decision. It appeared that Sebastian Rohill happened to be one of them. Yet why did this mech technician feel the need to resort to this option in the first place?

"You don't understand!" Stan said with a desperate voice. "I have to work hard for the KNG! The company is going through tougher times! Anyone who slacks off or is too slow at their jobs get fired! Do you know how much the company pays us? We need to show that we deserve to work there!"

"Ah." Ves uttered. The other shoe finally dropped. It seemed the KNG's employment policy finally showed another crack. "Strange. I haven't seen any of that during my time at the KNG."

"We'd never throw any shade at the KNG! The company has been good to us! We all wanted to pay them back! If we aren't working hard enough, they'd fire us and replace us with one of the many others waiting in line to join the company! Lately, it's not enough to put in a hundred percent of my effort! I have to put in at least half as more to help the company go through these hard times!"

Ves crossed his arms. "There's more to that, I believe. The private market may be having a glut of mech technicians now due to all of the companies that have shuttered, but the Mech Corps is always eager to replenish their losses. You're afraid they'll draft unemployed mech technicians like you, aren't you?"

A pulsing shock ran through Stan. "I-I-I-I don't want to go to war! I'm just a mech technician! I don't belong on the frontlines!"

Someone like Stan was young enough to have missed the previous war. Therefore, he was eligible for the draft. The only reason why the Mech Corps hadn't snapped him up was because he already worked at the KNG.

The Mech Corps generally left mech technicians alone if they already worked for a company, especially one as large and productive as the KNG that already contributed to military production.

That afforded the mech technicians who worked there shelter against being sent to war. While the Bright Republic constantly encouraged its citizens to answer the call of battles, the horrendous casualties suffered in each generation scared many of them away.

Ves unconsciously looked down on Stan even more. "I get it. The KNG is bleeding money so they're pushing their workforce harder. You weren't originally a very good mech technician, so in order to keep up with the higher expectations of the company, you turned to help. My question is, how long have you been using?"

The mech technician didn't want to answer, so Ves slammed his fist against the metal table.

"TELL ME!"

"Damnit, I started using since I got hired, okay!? I wasn't confident I could keep up!"

"Stan here is a heavy user for sure." Leland spoke from the side. "You can tell from his nervous ticks and how he's always restless that he's been using performance-enhancing stimulants for years."

"I've been starting off with the lighter stuff." Stan said hopelessly. "Just a little bit, okay? Helped me learn stuff and keep up with the work at the same time. I kept trying to lay it off once I studied enough, but there's always more to learn. Then the war happened."

"The company suddenly demanded more from their workers at that point, right?"

"Yeah. It didn't happen immediately. Our workload got a little tighter and there was less time for me to study at the company library. Then we spent pretty much all of our time at the production lines, yet even then it wasn't enough! People started getting fired when they were just a bit too slow to keep up and that's when we all got spooked!"

At the start, Stan only injected himself with stimulants he obtained from the local gang in Mosville. Selling performance-enhancing substances was big business in Bentheim and pretty much every gang offered them, so it was trivial for Stan to get his hands on something.

Yet for Stan, the lighter stuff wasn't enough for him anymore. He needed more potent stimulants. The gang hooked him up with more expensive stimulants, and for a time the mech technician managed to keep up with his job.

Until even that failed to give him the boost he needed to hang on to the expectations set upon him. The downside of his excellent performance resulted in greater pay but also greater responsibilities. If he stopped taking stimulants one day, not only would he drop down to a standard below his previous track record, but he would outright crash to the bottom due to the severe withdrawal symptoms that inevitably followed.

Even so, Leland had something to say about the particular stimulant that Stan admitted to using.

"Enoncolantis-3 is a difficult drug to obtain. It's synthesized in the frontier because the core ingredients can only be harvested from exoplants that is found there. Not every sells it and when they do, the prices are inevitably high."

Ves frowned. "What's the use of this stimulant?"

"There are two major advantages. First, it boosts a human's cognitive functions more effectively with comparatively less side effects. Second, it's very hard to detect in ordinary circumstances. Most detectors installed in workplaces like the KNG's Ansel Complex is capable of screening out many ordinary drugs, but Enocolantis-3 is definitely not one of them. It's too rare and difficult to detect."

"The demand for this product is high but the supply is rather difficult." Ves summed up. "How much does it cost to take a single dose?"

"In pill form, I'd reckon no less than a thousand credits per brain pill!"

Ves turned around in shock. "That much?!"

Even though Ves earned enough money to fill a swimming pool with pills, he was still very much aware of the salaries of average mech technicians. Even the well-paid mech technicians of the KNG could never afford to take the drug continuously!

Considering that Stan looked as if he swallowed a brain pill every day, there was no way he could ever be able to afford his addiction through his own salary!

"Where do you get the money to pay for your daily fix?" He asked the man.

Stan didn't want to answer. He kept his mouth shut while his body was going through continuous shudders. Ves looked at Leland, who shrugged.

"I did not anticipate that Stan here is a substance abuser. The sedatives and other drugs we pumped in his bloodstream are clashing against his withdrawal symptoms. We picked him up from his apartment while he still slept, so he didn't have any time to take a brain pill."

That explained the exaggerated neurotic movements from the man. Back at the Ansel Complex, Stan didn't behave too different from a well-motivated

employee. The slight oddities in his demeanor didn't necessarily point to any substance abuse, especially considering that each employee coming to work needed to pass through a scanner.

Yet those scanners only looked out for known substances. The massive underground pharmaceutical industry constantly cooked up new drugs and stimulants that creatively gave their users the fix they craved without running afoul of a detector.

Ves hadn't heard of Enoncolantis-3, so it must have been developed recently. However, he was very much aware of what kind of drugs that brain pills encompassed.

These kinds of upscale performance-enhancing stimulants sold very well among professionals. Their high prices offered no hindrance to promising talents who wanted to gain some sort of edge over their colleagues in order to obtain a promotion.

In fact, mech designers ought to be one of the most prevalent users of brain pills!

For a mech technician to be able to sustain the daily usage of such an upscale product was weird because no mech technician could afford its use for long. Therefore, no matter if Stan was already starting to go through withdrawal, Ves really wanted to know how the mech technician paid for it all.

"Tell me." Ves repeated, putting his strong Spirituality to bear.

Stan simply shook his head in a neurotic manner.

"TELL ME!" Ves slammed both of his fists against the table.

The abrupt impact caused Stan to jump, though his restraints kept him tied to his seat. The pressure bearing down on him from Ves and his own body was too much for him to endure!

"I passed on information, alright! They kept asking me questions and I had to answer them if I wanted to get my next brain pill!"

Both Leland and Ves lit up. This was what they wanted to hear!

"Who did you report to?" Ves pressed on. "Who supplied you with brain pills in exchange for intel on the KNG?"

"I.. I don't know! They never told me who they were! When you deal with stuff like this, you always try to find out as little as possible!"

At this, Leland sighed. "Useless. An indirect connection like this takes too much time to follow up."

"It depends on the information that Stan has provided." Ves replied before turning back to the mech technician. "What did you pass on?"

"All kinds of information I could get my hands on. Technical specifications. Production schedules. Personnel lists. Security arrangements. Maps. Stuff like that."

That didn't necessarily led to the BLM. It could have been one of KNG's competitors trying to keep tabs on the Ansel Complex.

As Stan answered more questions, Ves did not find the smoking gun he was looking for. A loyal employee turned informant to some unknown party was not the major offense that Flashlight sought to indict the KNG!

Chapter 995 Combining Clues

At some point, Stan's withdrawal symptoms grew so severe that he could no longer coherently answer any questions. Neither Leland nor his strike stream possessed the required medical expertise to counteract the effects, and trying to return to the man's home to grab his brain pills took too long and risked exposure.

Ves and Leland stepped out of the interrogation room. Ves looked disappointed while Leland adopted an expression of distaste.

"Incidents like this are all too common. The important point is that we're not dealing with amateurs. Anyone who is able to distribute enoncolantis-3 in Bentheim won't be so careless to leave a direct trail to their actual identities. It could be the BLM, but it could also be the Blood Claws or even the Peace Association that supplied Stan with the brain pills."

"So there is no way you can follow up on the source of the pills?"

Leland shook his head. "Whoever has been supplying Stan with the pills will probably lay low and disappear as soon as word of his disappearance and subsequent death spreads."

Damn. That meant that investigation that channel was a dead end.

"There are other mech technicians at the KNG with the same traits."

"One incident is a coincidence is enough. Another incident that follows close to the previous one will definitely alert the KNG and a number of other organizations. I won't authorize another kidnapping. I'm sorry Ves, but this line of inquiry ends here. If you want to follow up on this case, then you'll have to do so in another fashion."

With Leland closing the door to questioning another addict, Ves had very few options left if he wanted to uncover the identities of the suppliers.

Besides, there wasn't that much point to investigating the suppliers. Flashlight wanted to find evidence of deliberate, high-level collaboration with the Bentheim Liberation Movement.

Even if the BLM hooked up a dozen mech technicians with brain pills, so what? The KNG could always throw them under the aircar argue that they were clueless victims to the BLM's nefarious schemes.

What Ves needed to do was to paint the KNG as traitors instead of victims!

"Let us suppose the BLM is gathering intel on the Ansel Complex through the use of informers." Leland said. "This shows that it's unlikely they have a man on the inside at that site. While it might be possible that they do have their own man inside and that they are merely gathering information from other sources to verify the information coming from their agent, it's too much of an effort. It seems much more likely that the BLM is merely fishing for information to plan for a future terrorist attack."

Ves couldn't argue with his logic. Even he believed this was the case. "So all of this was a waste of time?"

"Well, you could always use that to back up your case that the KNG is in cahoots with the BLM." Leland grinned. "If you present the addicted mech technicians as separatists instead of informants, then you'd likely be able to strengthen your case against the company."

That entailed fabricating an accusation that Ves knew wasn't true. He didn't want to resort to this option if possible, so he merely shook his head and said nothing more of it. Instead, he turned to another subject.

"How will you take care of Stan?"

"The other members of the strike team has already prepared a cover story. We'll put him on his daily commute and shoot it down. His death won't attract too much attention among the dozens of other occupants going to to work. We'll blame the attack on Vesian agitators trying to destabilize Bentheim. They've already staged hundreds of random attacks like this to terrorize the populace, so one more attack will hardly seem unusual as long as we leave behind the right traces."

Ves regretted hearing this answer. Lots of people boarded air transit every day, and the biggest vehicles fitted hundreds of people.

Knowing that Flashlight did not shy away from dragging innocent people to their deaths just because they were at the wrong place at the wrong time sat very poorly with Ves. As he stared at Leland, Ves figured the intelligence officer deliberately divulged this information.

For what reason? To test him? To try and see if Ves would still be committed to working together with Flashlight?

It might be all a lie. Ves didn't know. As they exited the construction site via their discreet aircar, Ves constantly pondered on the consequences of his actions.

He continued to do so once the aircar dropped him off at the military base, whereupon he showed up in public again and went to work in a normal fashion.

Once he arrived at the Ansel Complex, the news had already reached them. One of their colleagues had been killed in an air transit accident!

"Stan is dead!"

"Over thirty people got killed!"

"It's the Vesians again! Their spies are everywhere on this planet!"

Work at the Ansel Complex inevitably slowed as everyone couldn't help but become affected by this sudden tragedy. One of their own had been killed in a terrorist attack!

Ves watched wide-eyed as he tuned into a Mosville news portal reporting live on the event. The crash site of the air transit not only killed its occupants, but also crashed into an office building, killing several workers inside!

Leland hadn't bluffed at all. He truly did manufacture a tragedy to take care of a loose end. Over thirty people died, which was a truly excessive number of casualties just to silence a single person!

The only consolation to Ves was that the investigation on Chief Nyquist's drinking buddies bore fruit. The strange thing was that one of them slightly panicked when he saw the news and hastily ran to a suspected safehouse while being followed by an agent of Flashlight!

That evening, Leland greeted Ves as he tiredly returned to his quarters with the good news.

"I'm not sure whether the person we tailed is part of the cell or group that's responsible for supplying the mech technicians working at the Ansel Complex with enoncolantis-3. Perhaps word of an attack on a KNG worker has spooked our person of interest due to other reasons. Nonetheless, his haste and lack of precautions has given us a firm lead of suspected BLM activity."

"Who is the person of interest and why are you so sure he's related to the BLM?"

Leland handed him a data pad with a record of the man in question. "Delten Swan is a former ship rating from the Sparky Nuts. These days, he works for an industrial company based in Mosville. He married once but he divorced after a few years. We suspect he is a member of the BLM from the way he gained entry into the safehouse and what little we managed to observe of what transpired inside. As long as we prepare more listening devices to record Delten's subsequent meetings, we can firmly prove that Delten is a specialist."

"Yet that's not enough, is it?" Ves remarked. "Delten Swan doesn't even work for the KNG."

"It's good to see that you have a bright head on your shoulders, Ves. You're right. Our target is the KNG, not Delten and not this Chief Nyquist. Therefore, it's not enough to prove that Nyquist is aware of Delten's association with the BLM. We need to provide evidence that Chief Nyquist is part of the same cell, and even then we need to prove that he's more than an informant."

When Ves began to list what he needed to do, he became depressed. "You're asking for a lot, but there's not a lot of time left. From what we've learned, it's possible that Chief Nyquist is working for the BLM, but it might be that he's just feeding information to them instead."

Leland nodded in agreement. "I've looked into Chief Nyquist, and he's a careful and experienced man. There's a high chance he'll lower his head and do absolutely nothing that could draw suspicion on him. The BLM may be contemptible in many ways, but they are very competent in training their assets to blend in with the environment."

If they could just take Chief Nyquist into custody in an official and aboveboard fashion, they would be able to learn the truth. Yet such an act would also increase the chance of exposing Flashlight, so Leland would never go along with such a measure.

Again, Ves felt as if his hands were tied behind his back. The demand that this investigation needed to be done fast but quietly continued to stymie him over and over again.

Yet having spent some time with Leland, Ves became a little more familiar with his mindset, methods and priorities. Leland and by extension Flashlight wasn't above resorting to drastic actions as long as they didn't risk exposure!

Ves gave Leland a speculative look. "If I may suggest something. It's better to present genuine evidence of separatist collaboration, right?"

"Right."

"Then why not take advantage of what we've found out to stir the pot and agitate the BLM even further?"

"Oh? Do you have a plan, Ves? You know that it's very risky for us to make a move right now, especially right after a terrorist attack."

From the clues they gathered about Chief Nyquist, they learned that he lost someone he loved to the war. They also learned that he associated himself with what appeared to be a core member of a BLM cell in Mosville.

Putting those two clues together strongly suggested that Chief Nyquist wasn't merely an informant like the recently-deceased Stan, but a true man on the inside.

Ves increasingly became more assured of his suspicion that Chief Nyquist was up to no good at the KNG. Yet even if Ves and Leland reported their current findings, the KNG would still be able to paint themselves as victims.

Whether real or not, Ves needed some way to tie Chief Nyquist's suspected affiliations and purpose to the higher ups of the KNG. A single chief technician, while holding a substantial amount of responsibility at his workplace, was not a representative of the company.

Leland knew this as well, so he wondered what Ves wanted to suggest to prove whether such a tie existed.

What if it didn't exist at all?

On this, Ves already resigned himself to bending the truth a bit if it came down to it. In any case, BLM involvement seemed extremely likely now so he did not have to fabricate a complete lie.

"A chief technician is not important enough, but if the presiding mech designer turns out to be a separatist as well, what then? Every mech designer assigned to supervise the operations at the different complexes are directly handpicked for the job by Mrs. Kadar or Mr. Neyvis. An Apprentice Mech Designer called Carl Stoddard is currently in charge at the Mosville Complex. It would be a severe failure on the part of the founders and leaders of the KNG if they directly picked a separatist to be in charge of one of their four major complexes."

"How do you suppose we do that?"

"We know where one of their safehouses are, right? We also know who frequents that place. Couldn't you employ one of your operatives to plant some fake evidence there that suggests that Carl Stoddard is one of their own men?"

"It's possible." Leland said with a thoughtful but not entirely encouraging expression. "It's also exceedingly risky in many ways. I don't like this plan of yours. It's too much risk for too little reward. Even if we manage to implicate Mr. Stoddard, he's not the big fish that Flashlight is hoping to catch. The KNG will be able to weather the storm as long as they pay a price."

Ves knew this. Therefore, what he said next surprised even Leland. "What if I tell you that I'm convinced the KNG is facilitating the supply of mechs for the BLM at their Mosville Complex?"

Chapter 996 A Daring Scheme

"I'm not a detective." Ves began to explain to Leland how he came to his conclusion. "But I'm a mech designer. More than that, I'm a business owner during my civilian career and spent a long time holding the position of head designer. I'm quite familiar with production and repair operations, both of which happen on a very large scale at the KNG's Mosville Complex."

Leland grew increasingly intrigued. "Have you managed to come across any hard evidence to back up your statements?"

"Not yet, but I've inferred it by combining the clues we've found with my own observations of the site. You have to be aware that the Mosville Complex stands out among the KNG's properties because it is their main service and repair center. Both the company's commercial and military clients send their damaged mechs to Mosville for servicing. Do you know how many parts get restored instead of replaced?"

"What's the difference?" The intelligence officer asked.

"Damaged and faulty mechs can be fixed up in two ways. Either you hammer its broken parts back together, or you take it out and replace it with a functional spare part fabricated on the spot or taken out of an inventory. The mech technicians at the Mosville Complex does both. In fact, most of the time they have a crew that is dedicated to identifying and ripping out broken and malfunctioning parts, another crew that is responsible for taking parts from the site's abundant inventory and assembling them onto the frame of the damaged mech, and finally a third crew which is solely tasked with processing the damaged parts."

Leland began to see which aspect about the operations at the Mosville Complex drew the most suspicion. "If I wanted to siphon away mechs from that site, I'd take control of the third crew."

"Exactly." Ves grinned. "In fact, it works best if the first crew is in collusion with the third crew. The first crew would pick out damaged but mostly functional parts for replacement and pull them out of the damaged mech. The third crew receives those valuable parts and assigns some of them for recycling or disposal despite the fact that they can still be used after some refurbishment."

"Even so, it sounds as if the third crew needs to be in on the entire scheme for it to work."

This also threw Ves for a loop for a while. "That's true. It's not easy to fudge the numbers of what can be recovered from 'recycling' or 'scrapping' the supposedly damaged parts. However, if the activity is small enough, it's possible to get away with it under everyone's noses. Chief Nyquist happens to be working for the third crew. Not only that, he's assigned to an important position in supervising the repairs for the military mechs that are sent back by the Bentheim mech regiments!"

This immediately alarmed Leland. "Do you mean that if Chief Nyquist is in a position to supply military mechs to the BLM?!"

Such an occurrence would be a huge scandal! Whether or not Kadar or Neyvis truly collaborated with the BLM in person didn't matter at that stage! Just the fact that the BLM got their hands on exclusive military hardware and in substantial numbers would be enough to tarnish the KNG's reputation and damage their relations with their backers!

If the separatists only got their hands on crappy bargain bin mech models, then the threat they posed could easily be dealt with by the authorities.

If they got their hands on more expensive budget and midrange mech models, then it would be a major crime for any company to supply them with these kinds of mechs. However, the damage wouldn't be too big of a deal if only a single mid-level manager or chief technician was responsible for smuggling commercial mechs to the BLM.

Once it became known that the KNG actually smuggled out mechs that belonged to the military, the crime was much more severe!

From his experiences with the internally developed mech models of the Flagrant Vandals, he knew that while they may not be the most expensive mechs in use. The true value of military mechs lay in how thoroughly they were designed. Almost always involving a Senior Mech Designer, they not only incorporated their specialties, but also made use of several exclusive military component licenses based on more advanced tech.

Mech regiments also wanted to avoid their military mechs falling into the hands of their enemies. If the Vesians scavenged an intact or functional mech, they could study its performance, quantify their parameters and identify their weak points.

This would be an absolute disaster for the mech regiment in question! The next time they fought against the Vesians, their military mechs might suddenly become ten or even twenty percent less effective!

Therefore, the KNG absolutely violated the trust extended by the Volari Starhawks and the other mech regiments that decided to entrust the production and servicing of their military mechs to the company!

"Just think about it." Ves said grimly. "Since the current war broke out, the five partnering military mech regiments sent back thousands of their mechs for repairs or replacements. If Chief Nyquist smuggled out enough functional parts to the BLM to reconstruct, say, a hundred military mechs, then the discrepancy won't grow large enough to alert the people around him. This is a scheme that slowly took place over the past several years!"

"It shouldn't be so easy." Leland retorted with some skepticism. "The KNG and the military mech technicians that are sent to assist in the work should have prevented such a major scheme."

Ves already interviewed people like Darryl Roland, a disabled mech technician sent back from the frontlines by the Mech Corps. The man's hero worship for a veteran like Nyquist was very evident!

"The way the repair crews are put together makes it easy to obscure the details. Chief Nyquist is a very popular chief technician among his colleagues and his former military service makes him very trustworthy among the workers sent by the Mech Corps. He won't be able to pull off this scheme alone, but remember that the KNG recently hired more personnel as well pressured them to work harder. The existing workers are either too new and inexperienced to know any better, too eager to suck up to a popular and powerful chief technician or too exhausted by their current workload to figure out if anything is wrong!"

"If I recall, Chief Nyquist holds a high position on the work floor, right?" Leland remembered.

Ves nodded. "Yes. That's an important point. He enjoys considerable authority within the Mosville Complex. Officially, he should also be in a position to pull some strings to allocate the right mech technicians to his work crew.

Unofficially, he appears to be influential enough among his fellow chiefs to be able to influence the site's specific policies and procedures."

Both of them paused for a time after Ves explained his reasoning. Leland appeared to have bought the story, but then his skepticism took force.

"All of this sounds plausible enough, but you don't have the evidence to back it up. Mere speculation along with drawing upon indirect clues and observation is not enough to prove your case."

"We have a direction we can work with." Ves defended himself. "Look, I didn't really pay any particular attention to the third crew up to now, but now that I know what they might be cooking up I can look specifically for signs that point to such activities. In addition, your men can follow up on the company that processes the 'supposed' scrap. The workers at the Mosville Complex is supposed to pull apart and crush any damaged parts that are marked for disposal, but I believe this step might have been skipped occasionally."

The BLM needed to subvert several steps in the chain to put this scheme to work, but Ves didn't think it was impossible to do so. Chief Nyquist's vital leadership role as well as the overall negligence and distraction of the managers there due to the recent difficulties left a lot of openings for the BLM to exploit.

For example, Ves was pretty sure that plenty of recent hires assigned to work with Chief Nyquist might be moles sent by the BLM. As a chief technician, it wasn't too difficult for Nyquist to assign specific individuals to his work crews.

However, the key requirement to back up his assertions was to find real proof!

Leland promised to look into the recycling and waste processing companies responsible for processing the Mosville Complex's waste output. Perhaps it would be possible for his men to tie the recently-identified people holed up in one of the BLM's safehouses to one of those suspect companies.

However, he also questioned whether it would still be necessary to drag in Carl Stoddard, the mech designer appointed by Kadar and Neyvis to supervise the Mosville Complex.

"Is Mr. Stoddard even involved?"

"I'm forty percent certain." Ves replied. "As the man in charge of supervising the processes that go on in the complex, he's responsible for what is happening there. While I'm sure he's also distracted by the recent setbacks and difficulties the KNG is experiencing, as long as he's a semi-competent mech designer, he should have picked up some signs."

"And if he's innocent?"

Ves shook his head. "He's not innocent. If he's not sympathiser or a mole for the BLM, he's at least criminally negligent for allowing some of the workers under his charge to smuggle out a substantial amount of military assets. Only the severity of Mr. Stoddard's crimes is in question, and I don't mind pushing him deeper into the pit he dug for himself to strengthen our case."

To Ves, there was a substantial difference between accusing an innocent mech designer for treason as opposed to exaggerating the blame on a criminally negligent mech designer. Since Mr. Stoddard was already doomed, why not make use of his fall to Flashlight's advantage?

Leland saw the merit in Ves' suggestion. "As the mech designer in charge, Carl Stoddard's implication in this scheme will definitely blow up the controversy even further by tying Mrs. Kadar and Mr. Neyvis more directly to

the accusations. I would have preferred to implicate the two Journeyman Mech Designers directly, but I can live with tarnishing one of their most trusted subordinate mech designers."

That was when Ves smiled in satisfaction. If everything went well and he found the proof he needed, perhaps he could avoid an outcome where he dragged down Kadar and Neyvis directly.

As long as they could prove they weren't involved in this scheme, they could avoid being taken into custody. The company might be able to survive as well, though in a much-diminished form and without much of the backing it previously enjoyed.

Even if the company was forced to close its doors, Kadar and Neyvis could always start a new company on a clean slate. As Journeyman Mech Designers, neither of them lacked in competence. Even if they completely lacked any funding or assets, they could still attract plenty of outside investment willing to make a quick credit on proven winners.

To Ves, he felt better if the happy family would be able to stay together. Neither Liefe or Aislin Kadar-Neyvis would see their father or mother taken into custody and be locked behind bars for a couple decades.

Of course, Ves reminded himself that he actually needed to prove his assertions. With time continuing to grow short, he returned to the Mosville Complex the next day and paid particular attention to the work performed by the first and third crews.

He first paid a visit to the workers of the first crew, the ones responsible for identifying and ripping off broken parts from military mechs. It was difficult to observe whether they did their jobs properly as Ves couldn't come too close.

Another problem was Jeff, the relations manager sent by the KNG's headquarters. The man continued to annoy Ves by distracting him with his talk.

Like an annoying fly that buzzed around his head, Ves couldn't swat the representative of the company away.

"I must say, Ves, the Mosville Complex takes good care of the mechs shipped back from the frontlines. Everyone here works hard to meet the needs of the military! We here at the KNG pride ourselves on helping the war effort by saving valuable mechs that still have some life left in them! Not only do we work fast, but we work with utmost care! None of the mechs we have sent back has ever received any complaints about their soundness!"

Could this annoying fly please shut up?!

Chapter 997 Control Problems

As long as the right people were in on it, any kind of fraudulent scheme could take place at a mech production site. Security and monitoring systems ordinarily caught anything that took place on company property, but they possessed deliberate holes.

Ves half suspected that the monitoring and security systems had already been hacked or compromised in some way. If the humans in control of those systems had been bribed, coerced or deceived into shutting down the monitoring, anything could take place.

The Kadar-Neyvis Group already selectively compromised those very same systems in order to do their shady business with the Peace Association.

However, smuggling out parts of military mechs was a much more egregious offense. Anyone with a bit of common sense would know that anything involved with military mechs needed to be treated with the strictest care!

This was why Ves guessed that the BLM had definitely placed some men on the inside, particularly one of the controllers of the monitoring system. He figured that Chief Nyquist only needed eight to ten accomplices at minimum to be able to subvert enough security and prevention procedures to be able to maintain the scheme while keeping everyone else in the dark.

As he made his various inspections, he drew a lot of attention from the workers in the vicinity due to Jeff's noisy company. The relations manager seemed to do his best to stop Ves from observing the work in peace and without alerting anyone close of the presence of a guest.

Nonetheless, even with the distraction Ves managed to note several questionable points. He witnessed parts with heavy damaged exteriors but functional internal components marked for scrap.

Ves knew his mechs, so even at a distance he could already observe that those handful of parts were anything but unrecoverable!

Certainly, while the Mech Corps deserved to receive the best, and it wouldn't be getting that if they received mechs made out of refurbished parts. No matter how well a crew tried to repair a part, prior battle damage always left some marks.

Yet to fabricate new parts to replace lightly-damaged parts was a substantial waste of time, resources and production capacity. If a repair crew replaced every single scratched part with freshly-fabricated ones, then they would quickly incur a substantial amount of expenses!

Therefore, most repair operations found it much more efficient to restore salvageable parts whenever they could.

That the repair crews at the KNG's Mosville Complex sometimes violated that rule practically aroused Ves' suspicion. He hadn't paid any attention to it before, but now that he looked out for it, he realized that for every hundred

cases, perhaps two or three would be fraudulently marked unsalvageable without good cause!

As Ves spent more time flitting around the shop floors, he noted that only a single crew responsible for assessment and disassembly was responsible for the fraudulent evaluations.

It happened to be one that contained several of Chief Nyquist's friends.

"That's one link." Ves muttered to himself before he resumed his seemingly random inspection.

Jeff saw no rhyme or reason for Ves' random inspections. They had walked throughout the entire complex more than once in the past few hours but never stuck around long enough.

"Is there anything you are looking for, Ves?"

"I am just doing my job." He said. "So far, I'm very impressed by the efficiency of your operations and the productivity of your workers."

Indeed, the KNG truly did its best when it came to working on their commercial mechs. Ves did not find that the workers pulled off any significant shenanigans when it came to the company's core products.

It should have been the same case for the military mechs entrusted in the KNG's care. Yet Ves found to his befuddlement that the suspect teams of mech technicians actually included some enlisted mech technicians who should have known better!

Either the mech technicians dispatched by the Mech Corps had been bought or influenced into participating in the scheme, or Ves misjudged the situation. This was because Ves determined that it didn't involve around a dozen people or so, but at least double that amount!

For a moment, Ves doubted whether he saw correctly. The more people involved in a scheme, the higher the chance of getting caught. Could the BLM really be so daring to involve that many people?

Evidently, they did.

The more Ves looked, the more his doubts cleared away. He definitely detected signs of fudging and it didn't concern a few bolts or plates here and there.

This wasn't the kind of fraud to overcharge the Mech Corps for costs that the company hadn't actually incurred. This was straight-up theft of military property!

As Ves left the first work crew and tried to observe the work being done by the third work crew, he saw more signs of fudging, though only once or twice among hundreds of legitimate procedures.

This was also how they kept their secret scheme so well hidden. The sophistication of their methods and the practiced way they blended sketchy moves among a ubiquitous amount of legitimate procedures made Ves suspect they had years of practice.

Ves turned to Jeff. "How often does Mr. Stoddard make the rounds like I am doing now?"

"Oh, I'm told he personally makes an inspection each and every day! Sometimes he completes a round in the morning and another one at the end of the day."

"That's very diligent of a mech designer."

"Mr. Stoddard takes his responsibilities very seriously." Jeff spoke with utmost confidence. "Mrs. Kadar and Mr. Neyvis often has high expectations for their top subordinate mech designers. Carl Stoddard is one of our rising talents and

we have high hopes that he will be able to advance to Journeyman in the next two decades. In order to facilitate his affinity with mechs, our bosses have sent him to supervise the Mosville Complex."

"Ah. So he doesn't have much practical shop floor experience?"

Jeff laughed awkwardly. "Mr. Stoddard is a practiced mech designer who has assisted Mrs. Kadar and Mr. Neyvis in many design projects. His work on our latest designs have been pivotal in streamlining and optimizing them for the market."

In other words, Carl Stoddard seemed to be the typical out-of-touch mech designer who never got his hands dirty. Ves could understand why Kadar and Neyvis assigned him to supervise the Mosville Complex, where a lot of mechs got taken apart and put back together. With that much activity, Stoddard would eventually be able to understand the practical side of working with mechs.

Yet to Ves, it sounded as if Stoddard, for all of his diligence, was still learning on the job. With such an inexperienced mech designer as the highest authority at the Mosville Complex, was it any surprise that Chief Nyquist and his accomplices could run a scheme unchecked?

What an enormous misjudgement! Kadar and Neyvis should have assigned someone they trusted with a lot workshop and factory experience to supervise the dizzyingly complex amount of operations that took place here. To send a mech designer with great design ability but nonexistent workshop experience to supervise an entire complex completely missed the mark!

It would be like asking a very good mech pilot to design a mech. Just because a mech pilot was related to mechs didn't mean he possessed the qualifications to design a mech!

The same logic applied to assigning virgin mech designers to a major manufacturing complex where thousands of people worked and an even greater amount of mechs, parts and supplies got shipped in and out every day!

Ves subtly shook his head. He felt enormously disappointed at the lacking supervision of this facility. For all its importance to the company and sensitivity in working with military hardware, the KNG placed the wrong people in the wrong positions!

As for the people who were supposed to back Stoddard up if he dropped the ball, one of their core chief technicians turned out to be one of the ringleaders of this scheme!

Ves became more and more aware that Chief Nyquist played a vital role in keeping everything out of sight. Without the indispensable help of such a core figure at the Mosville Complex, a scheme of this scale could never happen!

The total failure in safeguarding military parts and equipment served as a cautionary tale to Ves. He knew that one day, something similar might happen one day at his own company.

Right now, the LMC only erected a single manufacturing complex, and ordinarily Ves worked right on top of the manufacturing floor where most of the work was being done.

However, what if the LMC expanded in the future? What if they set up a brand new manufacturing complex on Bentheim or in a foreign state? It would be impossible for Ves to visit those premises in person in order to inspect if any of his employees tried to fudge the numbers or pull off some kind of scheme!

Resort to technology? As Ves personally witnessed here at the Mosville Complex, technology was anything but omnipotent as long as they remained susceptible to human manipulation!

Control and supervision problems always existed in any large-scale endeavor. Neither the LMC or KNG would ever be able to prevent such instances completely.

Even so, the KNG's four major manufacturing and servicing complexes were all situated on Bentheim. Could it hurt Mrs. Kadar or Mr. Neyvis a bit if they branched out some time to check up the operations at every site?

"Of course, that is why they placed Mr. Stoddard here."

The presiding mech designer's job was to be an extension of Kadar and Neyvis's will. Certainly, Ves had no reason to question Stoddard's actual loyalties anymore, but just because he represented the will of his bosses didn't mean he possessed their skill and discernment!

This was the critical flaw that left a huge opening in the repair and replacement operations at the Mosville Complex. Stoddard's loyalty and devotion could not make up for his lack of competence in this area.

The more Ves observed the abject failures of those who were supposed to be in charge, the more he felt as if he witnessed ongoing shuttle crash.

Something like this could never be sustained forever. Eventually, those responsible would slip up and get caught.

Ves wondered what would happen at that moment and how the BLM planned to respond.

In his introspection, he may have gotten too close to some of the shiftier operations, because Chief Nyquist himself suddenly appeared.

"Mr. Larkinson! What brings you to these parts?"

"Ah, I'm just checking how your workers are handling our military mechs." Ves quickly replied. "I have a personal interest in how you are treating the spaceborn mechs for the 1st Volari Starhawks. One of my cousins Ghanso is

a rising mech pilot at that mech regiment, so I want to do my part behind the frontlines to insure he and his comrades receive the best mechs that Bentheim can provide."

Chief Nyquist gave a reassuring smile to Ves. "Ah, family. I understand your concerns. I'm personally on top of many of the mechs we receive from the Volari Starhawks. Let me show you around how thoroughly we inspect and restore the functionality of their damages."

Through his insistence, Nyquist casually guided Ves away from the areas where sketchy activities probably took place.

Inwardly, Ves applauded the chief technician's smooth way in diverting him away. However, this only strengthened his belief that Chief Nyquist definitely played a pivotal role in this scheme.

As Ves got shown around the safer areas of the complex, Ves couldn't help but wonder if he had been a little too inquisitive for his own good. While he observed a good number of improprieties, had he been too blatant about his searches?

Even as a liaison mech designer, Ves had been way too nosy compared to others who held the same job. Yet Chief Nyquist showed no particular interest in him once they walked away from the more sensitive places.

Ves resolved to complete this investigation as fast as possible.

Chapter 998 Continuity

At the end of the work day, Chief Nyquist finally left their company. Ves hadn't seen anything of note, but the observations he made earlier gave him plenty of ammunition as long as he submitted his report fast enough.

As Ves was ready to return to base, he turned to Jeff for one more question. "Say, if Mr. Stoddard advances to Journeyman one day, will he still decide to

work under Kadar and Neyvis? What stops him from parting ways with his employers and start his own business?"

"Oh, the KNG already signed an MTA-enforced contract with Mr. Stoddard that offers several options in the event of his advancement." The relations manager answered. "It is a very standard contract in the mech industry. I'm surprised you haven't heard of it yet. Many major mech manufacturers attract design talents with these contracts."

"What do these contracts entail?"

"Upon event of the advancement of a mech designer to Journeyman, they receive at least two options. The first option would be to continue to work for the company. Newly-advanced Journeyman not only receive better treatment to fit their new status, they are also offered a certain amount of shares, usually ten percent or more depending on their commitment."

"Ah, I have heard of those kinds of arrangements, just not as concrete." Ves replied. A favorable advancement contract like this used to be so far away from him that he never looked into it. "Ten percent sounds kind of small though."

"That is just the standard minimum convention in the industry. Both the mech designer and the company can negotiate a different proportion of shares if they like. Also, it is very fair considering that a newly-advanced Journeyman has taken none of the risks and contributed very little in the startup, growth and maturation of the mech company. Every new Journeyman starts with around ten percent shares, and slowly builds up as they contribute more in the company."

"They are being paid in shares?"

"Yes." Jeff nodded. "A newly advanced Journeyman is not that much better than an Apprentice, but after a decade or so of seasoning they would usually

be able to match the prowess of an older generation Journeyman. It is fair to remunerate them with a greater stake in the company they increasingly help build up. This is also a good way to keep a promising Journeyman committed to the company. In some cases, the older Journeyman relinquishes more shares to the younger Journeyman in order to provide the company with continuity."

That sounded like a very far-sighted arrangement to Ves. "The younger Journeyman essentially inherits the company from his former boss when the latter dies or retires."

The pivotal role of Journeyman Mech Designers meant that they wouldn't be resigned to work for just salary when working at a company being led by an older Journeyman.

At the very least, working for a Senior Mech Designer allowed them to enjoy the tutelage of a superior in the profession, but working for another Journeyman yielded very little benefits to someone of the same rank.

Therefore, offering these talented and independently capable mech designers a stake in the company was essential to retain these talents!

A mech company headed by one or two Journeyman like the KNG owed all of their success to them. This worked fine when Kadar and Neyvis still had at least half a century or more time to lead their company.

Yet what happened after they became too old to work? The KNG would stagnate and decline until it eventually collapsed after it failed to design new mechs that equalled their older products.

Therefore, continuity became a very serious issue to mech companies highly dependent on a small number of mech designers for success.

As Jeff explained, it was no use for the founders and owners of a thriving mech company to hold fifty percent of its shares when the value of that company eventually dropped down to zero!

Therefore, instances where the first-generation mech designers slowly sold or rewarded their shares to a promising second-generation mech designer happened frequently. The older mech designers only kept enough shares in the company for their own heirs to live on, but not much more than that!

Of course, it would be best if the second-generation mech designer was part of the same family as the first-generation mech designer! Yet the odds weren't optimistic, as very few mech designers ever advanced to Journeyman to begin with. Therefore, it did not surprise Ves that Kadar and Neyvis treated Stoddard favorable to the point of eyeing him as a possible heir to lead the KNG in the future.

Still, most mech companies failed to provide for continuity. Ves heard of many successful mech companies shuttering their doors because their lead designers died but failed to attract a successor.

"What is the other option that Stoddard can pick if he rejects the offer of a stake in the company?"

"Oh, he is still free to found his own company or work for someone else. It is just that in the event of setting up a company, he's obliged to offer at least ten percent of its shares or more to the KNG. Our company did spend a lot of time and effort on nurturing him to become a Journeyman. It is only fair for him to pay something back. If he works for something else, he'll have to hand over twenty percent to fifty percent of his earnings, depending on a complex formula. It's mainly heftier in order to compensate for the fact that he might work for a potential competitor."

All in all, these kinds of contracts all aimed to have the younger mech designer pay something back to the older one. To be honest, Ves didn't find them very favorable to the younger mech designers, but if they didn't sign them the company would focus their efforts on nurturing a more pliable young talent instead!

These considerations only applied to mech companies led by Journeyman or higher. Companies led by Apprentices and lower like the LMC didn't merit such considerations. So many companies at this level already existed that they constantly rose and fell by the hundreds each year.

Finding a replacement mech designer to take over for the older one was also a lot more trivial because so many Apprentices would jump at the opportunity to take over the helm of an established mech company!

"Is Stoddard the most promising mech designer at the KNG?"

"Oh, who can predict if an Apprentice can grow to a Journeyman?" Jeff replied sheepishly. "You know better than me how difficult it is to take that leap. The KNG employs many Apprentices, and we've put three more colleagues of Mr. Stoddard in charge of the other manufacturing complexes."

A rotation also existed to give other promising Apprentices of the KNG a chance to get close to a major manufacturing site. Stoddard wouldn't preside over the Mosville Complex for longer than a couple of years. At that time, some other fresh-faced Apprentice would take over, and the entire learning progress began anew.

While such an arrangement helped a larger number of mech designers enrich their understanding and feel for mechs, the gaps were equally as evident. The effective degree of supervision they could provide was practically minimal if hotshot mech designers constantly shuttled in and out after spending only a

year or two to hold a position they needed at least that much time to become competent enough to properly discharge their responsibilities!

As a business owner who might one day be in the same position as Kadar and Neyvis, he understood their position. In a free labor market where mech designers could work for anyone they wanted or work for themselves by starting their own businesses, it was really difficult to attract capable and talented mech designers.

Therefore, Kadar and Neyvis essentially had to bend over backwards to an extent to retain promising talents. Mech designers with value mostly knew how desirable they were. Employers who wanted to hold on to them not only needed to treat them with respect, but also take a step further and treat them like princes!

They had no other choice. It would be far too difficult and costly to hire an existing Journeyman Mech Designer who in most cases were already their competitors.

So the most practical solution is the approach adopted by many companies and institutions. Ves knew that many of them scouted and brought in talents early. While their employers nurtured and invested into the development of these talents, they simultaneously indoctrinated them in order to capture their loyalty and affection.

Companies and institutions went through all of this trouble because it was one of the most cost-effective if time-consuming means of providing for continuity!

Having observed and heard from Jeff how the KNG managed continuity, Ves again reflected on how the LMC should approach the same issue.

Eventually, it came down to his own capabilities. Ves bet that Senior Mech Designers didn't have to worry that much about this issue, at least when it came to hiring Journeymen to join their design teams.

The difference between a Senior and Journeyman was that the latter didn't have much to offer to other Journeymen. Therefore, to compensate for the lack of benefits in terms of tutoring and guidance from a superior in the profession, they wanted to be paid with shares in the company instead!

Ves disliked the latter option for multiple reasons. Who wanted to dilute their own control over the company they founded and raised by their own efforts?

Also, the more Journeymen he hired, the more he had to dilute his own share in his company!

This simple truth probably prevented most companies from accumulating too many Journeymen!

Only a large government institution such as the Mech Corps dared to employ hundreds of Journeyman Mech Designers without offering shares. Even then, the military only got away with it because they partnered up with a large amount of Senior Mech Designers, each of which offered valuable learning opportunities to many Journeymen!

A low-ranking Novice Mech Designer like Ketis didn't deserve this kind of consideration. There were so many of them that some on the government even thought their numbers needed culling every now and then!

Yet any mech company that tried to make it big couldn't grow without a sufficient amount of talented and high-ranking mech designers to support their expansion. And these mech designers were all self-serving in a way and would never work for peanuts as pay. The more promise they held, the more benefits they demanded.

Ves also saw the solution to the LMC's dilemma. As long as Ves improved far enough to be considered as an authority in the field, some Journeymen would love to work under him as long as they received his tutelage.

"Perhaps this is also another reason why so many high-ranking mech designers become professors at various universities."

Any mech designer capable enough to instruct students in their profession gained a reputation for good instruction. The more prestigious the school they taught at, the greater the attraction!

In this way, all of those mech designers who worked as professors as a side job would be able to attract talented mech designers into working for them with much less compensation than in a purely commercial setting!

What a slick arrangement!

There were quite a lot of advantages to giving back to the profession by becoming a teacher. However, it wasn't so easy to become a professor at a decent university. Ves could forget about becoming a teacher for prestigious institutions such as the Ansel University of Mech Design or the Leemar Institute of Technology.

Yet it was exactly those kinds of teachers that attracted hundreds of ambitious Journeymen to come work for them for free!

Ves shook his head. He was too far away from reaching those heights. Right now, the LMC already did brisk business with Apprentice-level mech designs so Ves saw no need to attract expensive talents to come work for his company for the time being.

"Thank you for enlightening me on the KNG's policies regarding continuity. You've taught me a lot of useful insights."

"No problem, Ves." Jeff smiled at him. "Mrs. Kadar and Mr. Neyvis has personally instructed me to accommodate you to an extent. We hope to build an enduring relationship with you. A future partnership or cooperation isn't out of the question once you end your military service."

Any ordinary Apprentice Mech Designer would whoop and jump at such an attractive offer! Yet to Ves, he saw no merit to cooperate with a company that would soon be tarnished by the report he planned to submit!

Chapter 999 Feeling Warm

After his long and insightful talk with Jeff, Ves said goodbye and entered the military shuttle sent to pick him up. As the armored vehicle lifted into the air, it flew back to the military base at a steady pace.

Ves looked forward to returning, because he observed enough clues to write a damning report. As long as Flashlight or the Mech Corps moved fast enough, they'd be able to uncover the evidence he planned to point out!

Even if he misjudged some of his observations, the accusations would still be able to stick as long as ten percent of his claims turned out to be true!

"Seems like there is no way to avoid a reckoning."

He no longer cared that much about Flashlight's inclinations on making the KNG suffer. Having gathered plenty of evidence of improper handling and outright stealing military mech parts made him rather angry and disappointed at the big mech manufacturer.

Yet even as he blamed the KNG, he couldn't help but fear such an outcome taking place at his own company one day. Ves knew that the important takeaway from this incident would be to be more thoughtful on how to delegate responsibilities.

"Regardless, this has been a very eye-opening lesson to me. Running a mech company is way more difficult than I initially thought."

Kadar and Neyvis already deserved a lot of credit for growing their company to this extent. The only domestic mech companies that surpassed the KNG all enjoyed the direction of Senior Mech Designers.

Therefore, Ves did admire them for their successes and didn't think their life's work should be shut down.

However, he had no say in the government's handling of the company and their owners. Depending on the severity of the problem as well as the agendas of those in power, Kadar and Neyvis could either receive a slap on the wrist or lose all of their property!

In the worst case, they might not even be able to escape jail, though Ves didn't think this option would be likely. Without evidence of their direct involvement in the scheme, they couldn't be blamed directly.

However, Ves knew that they held ultimate responsibility over military production in their facilities. Regardless of how many lower workers failed to do their duties, ultimately the negligence and lack of effort on the part of the owners allowed them all to get away with their misdeeds.

He put aside his deliberations when the shuttle landed at the parking zone of the military base. As Ves waved the shuttle pilot goodbye, he walked towards the building that held his quarters so he could pass on his conclusions to Leland.

The intelligence officer would be able to live with the accusations he planned to report. Ves felt a little relieved that he didn't have to report too many falsehoods to meet Flashlight's expectations on how he chose to fulfill the mission.

Once Ves put this sordid experience behind him, he figured he earned enough kudos from Flashlight to enjoy their backing and protection in earnest.

He deserved it. After all the hardships he endured and the risks he took, Ves definitely expected Flashlight to compensate him sincerely.

Hopefully, this would be the last dangerous mission he took part in. A mech designer like him belonged in a quiet, well-defended research base like

Frozen Point. Even if he got assigned to an unfulfilling chore of a job again, Ves resolved to never complain about his duties again!

As Ves walked halfway back to the officer barracks that held his quarters, a bright light instantly flashed across the base.

"ARRGH!"

Moments later, Ves finally felt an excruciating pain! A powerful laser beam burned a hole right through his service dress uniform, punched through his chest and burned another hole on the way out!

Alarms instantly rang out across the base and a host of mechs and security guards jumped into action to secure the entire premises. A handful of emergency responders already raced towards the open spot where Ves collapsed!

"Assassin!"

"Who fired that laser?! Triangulate its origin point and secure the area!"

"Sir, we've detected that a high-powered laser rifle has been fired inside the premises of our base!"

"Damn it! The sniper is someone from the inside!"

"Spread out! Spread out! Don't let the sniper get away! Also, immediately account for every personnel and guest at our base! Ground all vehicles and don't let any of them enter or exit!"

As the guards and officers stationed at the base went into action, Ves felt hot, numb, burned, pained and woozy at the same time!

Surprisingly, Ves managed to hold on to his consciousness, enough to realize three important facts.

First, the sniper aimed at his heart! Ordinarily, this would have resulted in an instant fatality when struck by a laser weapon, but it just so happened that Ves did not possess a normal heart anymore.

Aside from his recent gene optimization treatments that made his body cope a little better against heat and burn damage, his half-alien traits saved him at the critical moment!

The Jutland organ that Dr. Jutland implanted in his body had at first surrounded his heart before slowly merging together to combine their functions!

This strange and wondrous organ which now integrated the functions of a heart was virtually immune to the energy damage which laser weapons typically discharged! No matter how hot or energetic a laser beam such weapons fired, a Jutland organ eagerly gobbled them all up without sustaining any damage as long as the incoming energy didn't surpass their appetite!

Only the weapons discharge of a massive mech-grade laser rifle would be able to induce his Jutland organ to collapse!

The second fact was that he'd been shot from the back. This assassin not only managed to fool the military base's stringent monitoring system, but also managed to fire off a shot without alerting Ves at all!

This stood in stark contrast to the assassination attempt he suffered much earlier in his career. Back then, an assassin armed with a massive deployed railgun attempted to kill him several times!

Yet at those instances, Ves always received advance warning due to the strange flicker of spirituality he perceived.

This time, the assassin avoided giving themselves away, thereby giving Ves no reaction time to defend himself!

The irony was that the railgun-armed assassin back then was probably better at his job than the laser-armed assassin that succeeded in striking Ves without warning!

The third fact struck Ves while the first responders finally reached his body and began to erect foldable armor screens to protect him from follow-up shots. For some reason, he hackingly coughed out a laugh due to the sheer absurdity of what he perceived.

The laser beam that punched through his uniform and chest, mostly leaving his Jutland organ intact along the way, also burned away his ribbons!

"The Mech Corps will be pissed.. hahaha.. even I'm pissed..."

"Mr. Larkinson! Please remain still!" One of the emergency responders said as they got over their shock that he managed to survive a shot through his heart.

"Your condition is too critical for you to talk!"

A large chunk of his lungs, arteries, flesh and other important pieces of himself got burned or vaporized. Ves didn't need a medical degree to figure that out. Yet strangely enough, his Jutland organ not only protected his heart function, but also siphoned away the damage immediately around it, thereby leaving enough parts intact to maintain some basic functioning.

For some reason, he managed to maintain his consciousness throughout the aftermath. Even though the emergency responders injected him with loads of sedatives before carting him off to the nearest infirmary, his body functioned far too well to be laid low by these trifles!

It still hurt a lot to have a hole burned through his body though! Half of the time, Ves screamed or moaned in pain.

As the entire military base went crazy in their hunt for the sniper, the doctors at the infirmary first placed him into a tank filled with some sort of medical

goop that instantly soothed the pains in his body. He felt as if much of the pressure of his wounds subsided a bit.

Now that Ves' condition stopped deteriorating through this measure, if only temporarily, the doctors ordered the entire tank to be brought to a military hospital which possessed the facilities to treat such a severe wound properly.

"Hang on, Mr. Larkinson!" The doctor said on the other side of the tank as a lifter bot grabbed hold of it. "I'm not sure why you've managed to survive such an attack, but you'll live! You have to!"

What happened next started to blur a bit in his mind. As the sedatives mixed in with the medical goop started to affect his body, Ves had difficulty staying awake. He was sure he blacked out at some instances, as every time he regained consciousness for a little bit his surroundings kept changing.

First he saw through the transparent cover of the tank that he'd been brought inside an armored shuttle.

Next, he woke up to the sight of medical experts scratching their heads over his medical file and all the aberrations they mentioned. How could they even begin to treat a half-alien freak like Ves?

Sometime later, he thought he woke up in the middle of an operation that sought to transplant cloned tissue into the missing portions of his body, but he wasn't sure.

After a few more jumps in lucidity where Ves only vaguely gained awareness of what went on, he finally woke up for real.

Even though he felt weak, pained and hopped up with far more sedatives than he thought was healthy, Ves couldn't help but release a laugh. His lung function also recovered due to the expert medical treatment he received!

"Hahaha... I survived. Damn it, for all the trouble it's given me, the Jutland organ is certainly miraculous."

"Indeed." Another voice spoke from the side, instantly causing Ves to jump in his bed.

"Leland! You're here!"

"I am." His case officer said and offered Ves a strangely pleased smile.

"You've gone through a rough time, Ves. I'm very glad to see you haven't been taken out. I worried for a moment but I was sure you'd be able to pull through."

The strangely enigmatic smile on Leland's face did not fit this situation. It actually caused Ves to grow suspicious.

A horrifying realization dawned upon him. "You... it wasn't the BLM who attempted to assassinate me, right? It was you! You ordered it! One of the members of the strike team probably did the deed!"

The sniper fired within the premises of the base. Who was in a better position to assassinate someone inside the the base than Flashlight that could easily subvert its existing security measures?

Leland grinned deviously at Ves. "I didn't want to let you know, but since you already figured it out, oh well. I admit it. I ordered the hit. Now don't worry Ves, I never intended to have you killed. I have access to record and I'm aware of your unusually strong physical state. I ordered my man to aim at your abnormal heart organ with complete confidence that you'll survive! And you have!"

"You utter piece of crap!"

Ves was so furious he wanted to scream at this slimy bastard! How could Leland do something like this to him! How could Flashlight let him get away

with it! No matter what his Jutland organ was capable of, it didn't change the fact that he could have died!

Leland ignored the anger directed at him. Instead, he moved on to business. "The assassination attempt has alarmed the Mech Corps. They definitely bought it. Now is the time to capitalize on it, Ves! Soon enough, the Mech Corps will dispatch someone to investigate the matter. Tell them that you suspect that the KNG or BLM is responsible and explain to them what you suspect is going on at the Mosville Complex. The Mech Corps will definitely be inclined to believe your claims due to attempt on your life!"

So that was why Leland ordered Ves to be struck by a laser beam! It was all to strengthen his case against the KNG and agitate the Mech Corps into treating his investigation with greater urgency!

"What if you miscalculated?" Ves asked. "What if I died?"

"Then your family would be compensated and you'd be buried a hero." Leland shrugged. "In any case, you would have died while you worked as a liaison to the KNG, so the company would definitely fall under intense scrutiny."

It sounded as if Leland didn't particularly care whether Ves lived or died in the first place. To him, the needs of Flashlight came first, and he would do whatever was necessary to achieve the greatest outcome that benefited the agency!

Chapter 1000 Elsewhere

The Nyxian Gap. Known as an endless area of sparse but incredibly spread out asteroids, nebulas, black holes, anomalies and other junk, it stretched across many light-years.

Situated in a corner of the Komodo Star Sector, it also happened to cross over into Majestic Teal and Vicious Mountain. The sheer amount of asteroids spread around this area was so large that many astrologists speculated

whether a large amount of star systems all blew up at once in recent stellar history.

The sheer amount of oddities that took root in the Nyxian Gap certainly suggested deliberate intent! Perhaps a war between precursor alien races detonated an entire space region.

No matter what happened back then, the Nyxian Gap became a major headache to the nearby star sectors.

The slightly discordant spacetime and chaotic situation turned it into a major pirate haven. The rare incidences of highly desirable exotics also turned it into a major treasure hunting destination.

The Nyxian Gap was just as prosperous and chaotic as the Faris Star Region. The only difference was that different pirate gangs and alliances held sway here, taking root deep within the far-flung asteroid fields that took a huge amount of time to reach through regular FTL.

This made it extremely difficult to hunt anyone down. Any outlaw that wanted to hide from any pursuers could easily get lost in the countless asteroids floating in this expansive region of space!

At this time, a light carrier flickered in space. Her engineering bay sustained heavy damage and most of her systems ran on emergency backup power sources.

Mechs coated in black and luminescent purple colors shaped in barbaric patterns surrounded the hapless craft. More light carriers and converted carriers surrounded the stricken carrier as well.

A handful of mechs in the same colors had been turned into wrecks earlier. The most surprising aspect about this battle was that they'd been sneak attacked by the same side!

At the bridge of the surrounded ship, the Corroded Hand, the mercenary commander paced nervously across the deck.

The Corroded Relic was the flagship of the Oblivion Hand, a notorious dark mercenary corps based in the Nyxian Gap! Yet from leading more than a dozen ships, the Corroded Relic suddenly found herself alone as the rest of the fleet turned against the flagship and the loyalists of the leader of the Oblivion Hand!

"How could this happen?!" Commander Arnold Dafoe thundered, to the consternation of the bridge officers. "The Oblivion Hand is my outfit! I built it from my own hands! How can they betray me for that treacherous bastard! Dark Cleaver was my right-hand man! I treated him well!"

"S-Sir, our blast doors are being compromised!"

BANG!

"SHUT UP!" Dafoe roared while he blasted the poor sod's face with his custom ballistic hand cannon! "This isn't over yet! Fetcher Paul is due to return at any moment! My right-hand man might have failed me, but my left-hand man has been with me forever! He'll surely bail us out!"

Unfortunately, the blast doors to the bridge abruptly slid open, having been overridden through some unknown means despite the dark mercenary commander's investment in its systems!

A number of heavily-armed and heavily armored exoskeleton soldiers in Oblivion Hand colors immediately stomped inside, gunning down the feeble resistance of the lightly-armored bridge officers.

The battle ended in seconds.

As blood, smoke, heat and suffering suffused the bridge compartment, the exoskeleton soldiers wordlessly turned around and stomped away.

Moments later, a single man garbed in a piloting suit entered the massacre-suffused bridge. The blast doors slowly slid shut again at a silent command from his comm. "Commander Arnold Dafoe. I've come to relieve your command."

"You dirty traitor!" Arnold yelled as his legs and arms had been apart. If not for the emergency measures of his combat armor, he would have already bled to death. "I took you in! I recognized your talents! How could you have become known as the Dark Cleaver in these parts without my nurturing?! You were nothing but a rat before I picked you up! Is this how you repay me?!"

"Let's not kid ourselves." The Dark Cleaver calmly shook his head. "You used me because you killed your old mech champion in a fit of rage. In fact, you killed hundreds of your own men whenever they disappointed you or when you woke up on a bad day."

"The Oblivion Hand is my property! I can do whatever I want with my possessions!"

"Your 'possessions' don't agree, commander. We've all collectively decided that the Oblivion Hand is due for a change in leadership."

"How did you do it?" Arnold Dafoe hissed. "How could you have taken control of my mechs and ships?! I made sure to wire them all up to my comm! No one except for me has ever touched my comm!"

The Dark Cleaver smirked. "This is a big galaxy. Nothing is impossible. You're so paranoid that it made it easy for us to use your backdoors against you once we've taken control over them. Thanks for allowing us to shutdown the mechs and ship systems that were under the control of your die-hard loyalists. It really saved us a lot of effort."

Before Commander Dafoe could utter another word, the Dark Cleaver simply extended out a laser pistol and shot the man in the head, making sure to vaporize his former boss' brains.

"It's done." The new commander of the Oblivion Hand announced.

"It's about time." A female voice commented as a small, miniature shape of a woman materialized besides him. She sent a dirty glance at the corpse lying in the center of the deck. "You schemed against Commander Dafoe for more than a year. Why didn't you just let me kill him in his sleep? You know what I'm capable of. Instead, you sent me to sabotage electronics, help you defeat other mech champions in duels and steal valuables from other outfits."

"I needed to take over the Oblivion Hand openly. Assassination would have thrown them into chaos and would have set Fetcher Paul against me. Now that I've turned the men here against Commander Dafoe in an open and aboveboard manner, he'll fall in line."

"And if he doesn't?"

"Then we'll hunt him down."

The two shared a companionable silence for a while. The tiny crystalline woman floating besides the Dark Cleaver suddenly raised her palm which held a miniature comm customized for her stature.

"What is it?"

"News from home- wait, WHAT?!"

"What's wrong!?"

"Our son! He's been shot in the middle of a military base on Bentheim!"

"Yes!"

"What is the Bright Republic doing with Ves?! How incompetent can they be to let an assassin take his life in their own base?! I should go back to teach them all a lesson!"

"Don't!" The Dark Cleaver said. "Right now, we still need to hide you from our pursuers. Remember what is at stake!"

He willingly abandoned his son, his family, his career and even his very own name in order to escape the repercussions of what he and his wife had done. Their powerful enemies still sought their traces, and while he and his wife did their best to erase their traces, the abilities of their pursuers were too unfathomable for them to rest easy!

"I really want to go back." She glowered.

"Not yet. It's not time yet."

"How long must we hide and scurry in the Nyxian Gap like rats?! A decade? A century?!"

"However long it takes for our pursuers to call it a day."

"That's not going to be easy, seeing as they are able to track me somehow."

"Then we keep moving. Now that I'm in control of the Oblivion Hand, I'll be able to decide where to bring the fleet and throw off their tracking method. It's easier for you to stay by my side this way."

"It will have to do." The tiny crystalline form sighed.

Elsewhere, a gorgeous, dark-haired woman garbed in a dashing uniform entered a lavishly-decorated office. A tall window loomed behind a desk where a single old matronly woman glanced up at the new entrant.

"Calabast. You've earned great merit for us earlier." The old woman said. "Are you truly willing to call it quits, just when you are in consideration of being put on a fast track promotion?"

The younger woman set down a data pad on the desk that contained a file that served as her formal resignation papers. "Life as an operative here doesn't suit me. This phase in my life is over now. It's time to move on and enjoy my spoils while I'm on a steadier assignment."

"I've heard of your intention to settle down as a deep cover agent. Why choose the Ylvaine Protectorate? That's a dull state that's filled with insular heretics. There is hardly anything there that warrants our attention."

Calabast grinned. "It's not the Ylvaine Protectorate that interests me. My position there is merely a means to an end. I'm only there so that I can reunite with someone interesting in the next state over."

The old woman quickly lost interest. Even if she wanted to retain Calabast, her identity made her untouchable. If she wanted to leave, there was no one who could stop her. Especially after the contributions she made.

As Calabast prepared to end her role as a hotshot operative, elsewhere, on Cloudy Curtain a woman laid down on a sofa placed in the penthouse office of the headquarters of the biggest and only mech company on the planet.

Right now, she held a mechanical cat in her grasp and rubbed her face against his bone-like metal exterior.

"You're so adorable, Lucky! Who's a good boy?"

"Meow!"

Aside from her casual clothing, she also wore a poofy beret that hid her horns though it didn't obscure her bright green hair.

Ever since she arrived at Cloudy Curtain half a year ago, she received a mixed welcome. None of the old fogies knew what to do with her, and she had very little opportunity to flex her mech design skills.

The first person who welcomed her to the company in earnest was Calsie. If not for her friendship and help, Ketis would have never been able to feel at home at the LMC.

These days, she mostly spent her time practicing her sword skills, studying the textbooks in the company library and playing with Lucky.

At this time, the woman sitting behind the desk in the expansive office suddenly stood up.

"Huh? What's up, Calsie?"

"We're leaving. Pack up some luggage. The Barracuda is waiting for us. Bring Lucky with you as well. The cat will be good company."

"Why? What's going on?"

"Ves got shot at Bentheim! It's plastered all over the galactic net!"

"WHAT?!" Ketis furiously shouted as she jumped to her feet. She inadvertently threw out Lucky from her grasp, but fortunately the mechanical cat instantly asserted himself in the air while meowing indignantly at Ketis for her rough handling. "Is he dead?!"

"Fortunately, no. A laser went through his chest, but he somehow managed to survive."

Ketis chuckled. "That's just like our boss. He's good at surviving. Still, he should be locked up somewhere safe, right? Will the military let us visit?"

"I'm not sure, but I'll call his grandpa Benjamin to pull some strings. I'm sure the Mech Corps will be understanding enough to let us visit."

"Good! I'm bored here and I never visited Bentheim before!"

As the two pivotal women arranged their visit to Ves at Bentheim, elsewhere more people related to Ves went through their own difficulties.

For example, Carlos gritted his teeth as he crawled his much-slimmed body out of the ruins of a bombarded mech workshop. The Vesians moved up their positions on this planet and managed to fire off a large volley of missiles at the base where Carlos worked at! As the defending mechs belatedly went into action to push the Vesians back, those left behind dealt with the aftermath.

"Mr. Shaw!" A couple of off-duty mech technicians ran to the workshop. "Your arm! It's been blown off!"

"I'll live." Carlos uttered. "Bring me to the infirmary! No wait. Don't help me. Try and dig out other survivors from the workshop first. There may be others that need your help more than I!"

"But Mr. Shaw! Your injuries look bad!"

"They won't kill me! My hazard suit already stabilized me! Go save the others first before you attend to me! This is just a flesh wound!"

As the mech technicians reluctantly left him outside the wrecked workshop to help out those that needed the help, Carlos looked up in the sky of this planet in contention and chuckled at someone who wasn't there.

"I hope you're having a better time than me, Ves! With your talent and ability, I'm sure you're comfy and safe in some kind of design base."

As Carlos dreamt of spending his time during the war at a luxurious hidden base placed far away from the fighting, the man he thought was living the life right now just finished grumbling at Leland.