

Chapter 981 Facade

After his sumptuous and extravagant dinner with the Kadar-Neyvis Family, Ves separated from them after receiving a schedule for his upcoming tour.

He hailed a military shuttle from his comm, which picked him up and brought him back to a military base which housed his assigned accommodation.

As Ves entered his private quarters, Leland Toll already waited for him there.

"I trust you made a good impression on Mrs. Kadar and Mr. Neyvis?"

"You tell me, Leland. Surely Flashlight managed to hook into the monitoring system of the Lyrical Kitchen, right?"

His case officer smirked. "Correct, and I'm sure that Spotlight hacked into it as well. It's not very useful however as guests know better than to discuss anything sensitive in such a semi-public location. From what I've witnessed, you did a good enough job in lowering their guard."

"Even if I lied, I didn't lie too much." Ves responded.

"That will remain the key throughout your interactions with the KNG. You need to be genuine enough for you to come across as authentic. The last thing we want to do is to evoke their suspicion that you've been sent to do some actual investigation."

Ves snorted at that. "Is the entire position of liaison mech designer even useful?"

"Oh, they are still very much needed. Especially to mech companies in the control of a single strong mech designer, they often tend to take weird directions from time to time. Having a liaison in place will force entrepreneurs to rein in some of their wildest actions. Liaisons aren't there to act as cops who will stop crimes when they happen. They are placed among companies

as a form of deterrence in order to ensure stability and continuity in operations."

"I see then." Ves nodded. "Even if the liaison is overly friendly with the companies they are meant to supervise, just having another mech designer present that isn't completely loyal is already enough to stop most antics."

"Let's move onto Kadar and Neyvis. Having met them in person, what are your impressions of the two?"

"They're a very happy pair. I really like their children. It's hard to imagine that there is anything amiss at the KNG."

"That's what they wanted you to believe. Don't fall for their act." Leland shook his head. "Perhaps you are too close and taken in by their impression of a perfect family, but even the best of people can take a wrong turn. The fact that they have a wondrous family doesn't rule out that they are guilty of treason."

"I can see what you mean, Leland, but it's really hard for me to imagine that Kadar or Neyvis are willing to ruin everything they built up so far. Their family is bound to be ruined and broken up if it turns out that they are really working together with the BLM."

"The main culprits behind any possible collusion may not even reach that high up. Even so, I don't want you to develop the impression that the two mech designers are completely innocent. You need to keep your eyes open as you inspect each aspect of the KNG. Base your judgement on facts and logic instead of your emotions."

The two discussed some other matters related to the job. Overall, the first meeting didn't leave Ves with much to go on. He needed to wait for the tour of the KNG's various facilities before he could return with more intelligence.

"The various properties of the KNG are well-guarded against real and virtual intrusions." Leland said. "We won't be able to monitor what is happening inside without risking detection. That would be very bad."

"So I'll be on my own when I do my inspections?"

"Correct, but a strike team of operatives will always be a few blocks away. Even now, they are still in hiding outside this base. They will follow you around discreetly and come to your aid if there is a need for intervention. However, all of this rests on the premise that Flashlight's involvement remains unknown. The strike team that is backing you up are constantly in disguise."

Hopefully, Ves wouldn't see the need to call for their help. "That's reassuring to hear. So to sum it up, I'll have to do all the actual inspections myself?"

"Correct. Otherwise, why would we have a need of a mech designer of your caliber? Right now, we need you because Flashlight has faith that you are skilled enough to detect any irregularities at the KNG's facilities in a very short amount of time. The faster you spot anything amiss, the sooner we can decide upon an appropriate response."

"How much time do I have?"

"We're not sure, but by my reckoning you should return to us with a definite confirmation no longer than three weeks."

Three weeks sounded short, too short for Ves to develop a close trust with Kadar and Neyvis. He'd have to be a bit more brazen and assertive in his role as liaison to wrap up his investigation in that short amount of time.

"Why three weeks? Is that when the threat of Vesian intrusion becomes real?"

"I can't say. Just know that we can only spare three weeks for your investigation before we have to pull you out and move to another plan."

Leland quickly left after mentioning a few more things about the happy family. Overall, the spy wanted Ves to remain sober and not be taken in too much by the overly rosy picture painted by the happy family.

Once Ves was left alone, he sat behind his terminal and wrote up a report of his activities for his cover role. Even though he didn't include any important details in this casual report, it was nonetheless a necessary activity for every liaison.

The next day, Ves ate a quick breakfast at the base, thereby also showing himself off at the personnel present there, before boarding a military shuttle again.

"Where to, Mr. Larkinson?"

"Take me to the headquarters of the Kadar-Neyvis Group."

The time limit imposed by Leland gave Ves a lot of pressure. He canceled some of his initial plans of visiting other areas of Dorum for the sole purpose of appearing in public to show off his awards like a nouveau riche.

"Even if I spend most of my time with the KNG, I'll already be exposed as it is. There's no need for me to visit some busy street to attract attention from the public."

During the shuttle ride, he idly activated his comm and browsed some of the local news portals. He searched his own name and found that a few outlets already started to report on Ves' eye-catching awards.

He smirked. "This is just the start."

He already encountered some ads showcasing his connection to the LMC. The more people looked him up, the more people would see those ads, and thereby become exposed to his company's products.

The shuttle landed at the familiar parking zone. As Ves left the shuttle, a familiar relations manager greeted him again.

"Ves, pleased to see you again. Mrs. Kadar and Mr. Neyvis both have business to attend, so they are not able to accompany you on your tour this time."

"That's okay. They are busy mech designers and I know that time is money to them. I can still do my job without their presence."

In fact, Ves preferred not to be accompanied by the two Journeymen because he wouldn't be able to get away with as much. Mech designers knew each other the best. If Ves showed an undue amount of interest in some of the more sensitive areas of the company, Kadar and Neyvis would easily be able to observe his unusual behavior.

He much preferred to be accompanied by a technical neophyte like Jeff who was good with people but bad with technology. He just had to make sure he wouldn't appear suspicious to any of the security guards or monitoring systems while he made his inspections.

"Today, there are two visits on the agenda. In the morning, I'll show you around our headquarters. In the afternoon, I'll take you to the design center where most of the magic happens."

"Sounds good."

Jeff brought Ves inside the headquarters and gave him a brief tour in every department. Of course, he only obtained a shallow glimpse at the work being done related to the company's financing, marketing, strategy and public relations activities.

What struck Ves the most during his tour throughout the headquarters was that everyone appeared genuinely happy and loyal. No one appeared stressed and none of the managers rode their subordinates very hard.

Jeff noticed his astonishment. "Our leaders are very concerned with the wellbeing of their employees. Treating our people as valued individuals instead of wage slaves is the first step to building an enduring company. We pay our people above average wages and we offer generous benefits as well as bountiful bonuses to them. Besides inspiring everyone's loyalty and devotion to the company, we've also managed to cut down attrition to a minimum while boosting productivity."

"It sounds really expensive, though. Can the KNG actually afford such generous treatment to its employees?"

"Our company is more than profitable enough to sustain such activities. The fact that very few of our people quit saves us a lot of time and money that we would have otherwise spent on retraining newcomers."

Even so, Ves still remained somewhat skeptical on the claim that the company wasn't wasting a lot of money on unnecessary benefits.

He found it somewhat regretful that the tour hadn't allowed him a deeper glimpse into the company's finances. Understanding their current financial state would help him a lot in determining whether they were desperate enough to look for... alternative sources of funding.

Even so, the accountants and managers at the Financial Department showed a bit less enthusiasm in front of Ves. Obviously, they coped with a bit more concerns than the other departments, but they did their best to show their best faces in front of Ves.

Ves realized that the entire visit so far consisted of theater. Jeff brought him along a guided tour through fabricated impressions of happy and productive workers.

Only once they neared the top of the headquarters did Ves get to meet with some of the top management team. An executive solely responsible for supervising the production of military assets greeted them at his office.

"Good morning, Mr. Larkinson." The older man said as they shook hands. "My name is Charlie Rosen, and I am the executive director for military production. Put simply, that means that all the assets we produce for the Mech Corps."

"Can you walk me over what the KNG produces right now?"

"Certainly. I have prepared a short presentation."

Once everyone sat down, Mr. Rosen presented the facts, most of which Ves already knew.

"We produce thirty-five different mech models for five different mech regiments of the Mech Corps at a time. That sounds impressive at first, but we don't run our production lines for each of these models at all times. We only need to produce enough military mechs to replenish the losses of the mech regiments deployed on the frontlines of the war."

Even so, trying to retain enough ability and know-how to be able to fabricate so many military mech models must require a considerable amount of skill and manpower!

"How many mechs have you produced in say, the last year?"

Charlie Rosen raised his eyes as if to recall the figure. "I'd say over seven-thousands mechs."

"That's quite a lot!" Ves replied with considerable surprise.

"The war is very hard on the mech regiments, as I'm sure you know from your own service. In most cases, mechs fall easily but their mech pilots are able to eject in time. Sometimes, the fallen mechs can be recovered, but there are many times when they aren't able to restore their damaged machines. That is

where we come in. Five different mech regiments rely on our production to cover a part or even their entire mech roster!"

This was a very major responsibility! If the KNG was a loyal and trustworthy mech manufacturer, then there was nothing wrong about their supply contracts with the individual mech regiments.

However, such a strong responsibility could easily be turned against the military. If someone powerful enough at the KNG wanted to sabotage the mech regiments, they could easily tamper with the mechs intended for the military.

This was why the Mech Corps felt the need to send liaison mech designers to the companies contracted to supply the military. Ves realized that even as he was tasked with finding out if the KNG covertly supplied the BLM with mechs and supplies, he also needed to take his cover role more seriously.

He needed to investigate whether the KNG also fudged the mechs they supplied to the mech regiments!

Chapter 982 Different Design Methodology

After his informative meeting with the executive director for military production, Ves became more aware of the KNG's importance in the Republic's war apparatus.

"Bentheim's industrial capacity is enormous." Charlie Rosen stated at the close of his presentation. "During our wars against the Vesians, every company has to do their part. While a mech manufacturer is already helping the Republic's economy by continuing their commercial activities, in many cases the state needs more direct assistance. The Kadar-Neyvis Group is proud to partner up with several military mech regiments and do our part in keeping them supplied with mechs and supplies!"

"That is a very admirable sentiment, Mr. Rosen." Ves nodded in apparent appreciation. "On behalf of the Mech Corps, we hope to continue our fruitful cooperation."

In the next couple of days, Jeff brought him to visit the KNG's design complex. Located in the outskirts of Dorum away from the hustle and bustle of the center of the city, the design complex exuded an academic mood. The mech designers who worked here all enjoyed the complex's rich greenery, peaceful parks and various recreational activities.

"Our bosses always state that designing mechs is a creative job." The relations manager told him as they calmly walked through a wooded area. Whoever designed the outdoor areas of the complex did a marvelous job, because Ves couldn't help but feel his stress levels decreasing amidst all of this peace and quiet. "Therefore, they specifically erected this design complex in order to provide a refreshing and uplifting environment for our mech designers."

"I can feel the remarkable design behind the layout and architecture here." Ves nodded in agreement. "Anyone who works here will probably feel as if they are in a paradise."

"That's the idea behind this design center. Here at the Kadar-Neyvis Group, we pay a lot of attention to the comfort and well-being of our employees. After all, how can we be one of those gauche companies where our upper management earns millions of credits while our backbone is barely making a pittance?"

"That's a very progressive attitude for the KNG to take." Ves commented without making too much of a judgement.

While Ves could see the appeal behind shaping the expansive complex into a peaceful, zen-like environment, he himself found it to be rather adverse to his own style of designing mechs.

Ves believed he designed the best mechs when fired up with passion. The higher the pressure, the more frantic he worked and the less he second-guessed himself. Even though he'd slip up from time to time, the creative solutions he formed under pressure made all of the shortcomings worth it in the end!

A calm and serene design environment like this may be able to lower a mech designer's stress level, but it would also douse their more excitable impulses! As a mech designer, Ves understood how deeply their profession depended on emotional outbursts to design original mechs.

Nonetheless, it also made sense for the KNG to offer this kind of relaxing environment to mech designers if they didn't contribute to anything substantial in the company's designs.

Flashes of inspiration and passion-fueled adrenaline rushes served the lead designers of a design project well, but their subordinate mech designers would never have a chance to introduce some of their own innovations to the design!

Mech designers who only did grunt work such as modeling and simulating mech designs in order to optimize them and expose any flaws did not depend too much on creativity. The tedious, mind-numbing work wore out any mech designer, so to offer this kind of placid environment to them was like injecting them with sedates and other mind-calming drugs.

This was perhaps the most nefarious aspect about this design complex! Anyone who worked here would be shaped by the environment into becoming an unthinking drone for the KNG. The subliminal messages suffused in the

complex's design depressed all of their excitable aspects in order to reinforce a mood of numb compliance.

He didn't mention all of this Jeff. In fact, Ves thought it was a great example on how to treat lower-level mech designers. Such a well-designed complex for mech designers prolonged their usefulness and allowed them to last longer before burning out.

"I've seen enough of the periphery. Please bring me inside."

They entered the main entrance and went through a pretty thorough security check where Ves had been forced to leave behind his military comm.

"My apologies, Ves, but you will have to leave behind any electronic devices. The work we undertake here is of vital importance to the company. We cannot allow anything we do inside to fall in the hands of our competitors."

"I understand."

Once they passed the security check, they entered deep within the bowels of the main facility. The overwhelmingly white interior with round smooth shapes and lack of sharp angles only reinforced the impression that this entire environment had been shaped to reinforce a sense of peace and calm.

"Many concurrent design projects take place in this facility." Jeff started to explain. "The KNG offers over fifty different mech models, many of which are only the latest versions in their product lines. It is here that work on the Mark II's, Mark III's, Mark IV's of our existing models are constantly being refined."

"Do the lead designers of all of these projects solely consist of Mrs. Kadar and Mr. Neyvis?"

"For the most part, they do. Sometimes they invite their fellow Journeyman colleagues to collaborate on a special mech design, but in most cases they are good enough to set the tone for the projects by themselves."

"How can they juggle this many design projects at once?"

"Their approach to designing mechs is to lead the design projects through intermittent guidance. Mrs. Kadar or Mr. Neyvis only has to spend a day or three to set an overall design a specific aspect, whereupon the assisting mech designers flesh out the direction through careful study and examination."

Ves wasn't too unfamiliar with this approach to designing mechs. A mech designer like him always engaged in only one design project at a time. Each time he embarked on a major design project, he put down everything else and devoted his entire attention span on designing a mech at the cost of losing track of external concerns.

Kadar and Neyvis couldn't afford to be too engulfed by their own design projects. Not only did they hold many responsibilities such as meeting with stakeholders and spending time with their children, they also needed to keep all of those design projects moving forward!

Just going from one design project after another one at a time sounded extremely inefficient to Ves. Therefore, he saw the logic in this distant and more imperious style of designing mechs. It wasn't too dissimilar from Professor Velten's approach to designing the Inheritor, Hellcat and Akkara designs back at the Flagrant Vandals.

It put Ves to thought as they visited some of the project workplaces. The design methodologies he witnessed seemed much more suited to a large mech company that continuously developed many designs at a time.

With only two lead designers but so many design projects all calling out for their attention, it was impossible for them to dedicate their full time on each of them! Kadar and Neyvis would run themselves ragged if they spent as much time on each design as Ves did on his own.

Ves only designed two original mechs for the market, while the two older Journeymen designed more than fifty commercial designs!

As Ves visited several design teams, he noted that all of them consisted of Apprentices and Novices. Not a single Journeyman Mech Designer could be found in their midst, and even the Apprentices themselves didn't seem too bright.

"Are there any other Journeymen or talented mech designers working here?"

"How could we?" Jeff shook his head in an honest fashion. "Any mech designer that is good enough to run their own companies have already done so. A mech designer of your caliber is very hard to retain. The only way to realistically pull over a mech designer with promise is to offer them a substantial amount of shares in the company."

"Or you could partner up with them. That's the case with Mrs. Kadar and Mr. Neyvis, right?"

Jeff smiled brightly. "Exactly! A personal union between our two bosses is very rare, but the Kadar-Neyvis Group that formed as a merger between their two former companies is much more powerful than the sum of its parts. The combination of two Journeyman Mech Designers who share everything they have together has been an absolute boon to our company's rise!"

Overall, as they toured the different design teams, Ves didn't get too see too much of their work. It wouldn't do for Ves to press for greater access as none of the design work on the KNG's commercial mechs had any bearing with the military.

This visit alone was only just a courtesy to the new liaison.

Still, Ves picked up plenty of insights. For example, for all of Jeff and other people's claims that the KNG looked out for their employees, he could see that the KNG didn't particularly value their mech designers.

This overly placid environment and the company's overall treatment of their lower-ranked mech designers all served the interests of the company owners.

The mech designers all enjoyed stable positions in the design teams, but Ves figured they did not enjoy that many prospects for improvement and advancement. A mech designer who joined the KNG's design teams would be destined to stall in their careers.

However, this was how the mech industry worked. The lead designers captured most of the benefits that came with designing mechs by exercising their creativity and coming up with innovations.

As for the mech designers that came after to refine the initial concept and optimize it into a form ready for the market, they held no say in how the mech design would shape out.

All of the mech designs published by the KNG either came at the hand of Kadar or Neyvis! Besides the occasional guest designer, no other mech designer earned any credit for developing the company's many designs!

Ves fell into a slightly introspective mood at the end of his tour through the facility. Perhaps if he hadn't obtained the system, Ves might have aspired to work for the KNG in a similar fashion. Unlike all the other alternative jobs that desperate mech designers ended up with, working as an assisting mech designer for the KNG seemed like a wish come true, as at least he'd be able to exercise his design ability, although to a very minor extent.

As Ves ended the tour for the day and took a shuttle ride back to base, he wondered how he should shape the LMC's design teams in the future. Should he adopt the model used by the KNG?

"The important point is that it works."

He knew that many mech companies above a certain scale with robust design teams adopted the same design methodology as the KNG. It aimed to solve

the problem of maintaining many design projects while having far too few design talents to go around.

For now, the LMC only offered two original mech models, but how long would that last? Any self-respecting mech company that did not specialize in a single type of mechs always offered a few varieties of mech types.

Ves himself dreamed of designing a dozen or so mechs belonging to the same product family. He wanted to design different mech models of different mech types but with several shared aspects and interchangeable parts.

A set of related mech models, each of which used several common parts and behaved in a similar fashion, was the dream of every mech designer! This was because many large customers often preferred to order large batches of mechs from the same seller. This not only simplified their logistical needs. Adopting mechs from the same product family also trained their mech pilots and mech technicians to excel in working with the same kinds of mechs!

Naturally, to develop an entire product family of mechs was easier said than done. However, Ves personally saw that the KNG made it work!

"The KNG maintains two product families, one for spaceborn mechs and one for frontline mechs. Some of them share the same engines, the same power reactors, the same energy cells, same performance profile and more!"

Chapter 983 Dominant Institution

Developing an entire product family asked a lot out of a mech designer. They needed to be skilled and creative enough to adapt the same set of component licenses to vastly different mech types.

In one perspective, the Blackbeak and the Crystal Lord could partially be considered to be part of the same product family. Ves recycled many of the component licenses used in the Blackbeak design such as the Veltrex Armor System and the Trailblazer mech engine in his Crystal Lord design.

However, Ves never set out to make their designs share many aspects in common. Overall, they still diverged substantially with regards to their internal architecture, power usage and more.

"The only reason why I reused the same component licenses is because I'm not rich enough to afford better another set of licenses of the same quality."

Many mech designers ended up designing mechs in that fashion, sharing similar design traits out of helpless necessity instead of a predetermined plan to design an entire product family.

"It's still too soon for me to think on embarking on such an ambitious project."

Besides the incredibly stringent demands on his design ability, starting up an entire product family also required him to select versatile component licenses that worked well in many different mech types.

While Ves thought he had the skills necessary to do so, he was still short on money and manpower. Also, it took an extremely long time to finish designing all of those mechs, enough for him to give up any notions of doing so when the current generation of mechs soon came to an end.

"There's no point starting a major design project when new technologies and standards will turn my efforts into cheap, lastgen goods."

In the mech industry, only Journeyman Mech Designers embarked on the path of starting up a product family.

Once the shuttle returned to the military base, Ves met up with Leland in his quarters again. The Flashlight intelligence officer seemed to have a way to sneak into his sleeping place without letting any guard or security system pick up his presence!

The thought frightened him for a moment, but he quickly suppressed it. Flashlight had no reason to sneak up on him in the middle of the night.

"Ves. How was your day today?"

"I visited their design complex. It was a very informative visit to me as a mech designer and a businessman. However, it has nothing to do with my job as a liaison. There's nothing going on there that is relevant to the investigation."

"Everything is relevant as long as you ask the right questions." Leland retorted.

"Oh? Did I miss something today?"

Ves sat down at his bed while Leland took up the seat next to the desk terminal.

"Where do you think most of the mech designers who work at the KNG come from, Ves?"

Now that he thought about it, many of the design teams he visited shared the same vibe he had seen many times at Frozen Point.

"They are all graduates of Ansel!"

"Exactly. The Ansel University of Mech Design prides itself on being the most premier institute for mech designers in the Republic. While the AUMD is not as good as the prestigious institutions of the Friday Coalition, anyone who graduates from Ansel expects to be a mech designer of note."

"Yet the mech market can't accommodate that many mech designers." Ves replied, seeing the point that Leland tried to make. "Ansel is famous for their high selection criteria. Those that manage to get in and study diligently are always above every other mech designer from the Republic. Even so, too many of them graduate each year. There simply isn't room for all of them to start their own businesses."

"Therefore, unless they are truly excellent, wealthy or connected enough to start up their own companies and propel them to success, most of their

careers aren't very distinguished. Their outcomes are better than the graduates of other institutions such as your very own alma mater, but if nothing changes, they will still be nobodies by the time they retire."

A mech designer hungered for success and acknowledgement. The best mech designers always dreamt of founding their own mech companies and grow them step by step towards a dominant market position.

Yet the mech market was cruel and vicious! The intense competition and finite amount of buyers left no room for every graduate of the AUMD to find carve out their own places in the market!

For some reason, even if the AUMD restricted their intake of students somewhat, they were just like every other institution and pumped out way too many mech designers, much more than the mech industry could take in fact!

"At the very least these Ansel alumni are better off than their peers who mostly have to abandon their design careers." Ves concluded. "I've seen many mech designers forced to give up their primary vocation in order to become a mech appraiser or mech repairer."

Leland sneered. "I'm not so sure the elite Ansel mech designers will be content with what you said. Ansel's way of bringing up their mech designers is meant to prepare them for success. That serves the winners just fine, but what about the losers? How would it feel to be treated as design royalty during your studies at Ansel, only to be begging for a design job once you are back on the streets?"

"It sounds like you take this problem is a lot more seriously than anyone else."

"Flashlight has a reason to be concerned. We admire Ansel for raising loyal and patriotic mech designers, some of whom are just as good as those who return after graduating from the famed institutions of the Friday Coalition. Yet

we are also concerned what the disaffected among them will try to do when their dream careers fail to materialize."

"You think... they'll join the BLM?"

"We don't think. We know. A fair number of mech designers from Ansel that are collaborating or outright working for the Bentheim Liberation Movement is very substantial!"

This sounded completely incongruent to Ves! Even if many of the graduates from Ansel might not be able to succeed in their startups, they should still be able to work for the Mech Corps or the various mech companies like the KNG. How could they even contemplate working for the most notorious terrorist organization in the Republic?

"I see the question in your mind, Ves. You wonder how those proud Ansel alumni would even deign to work with the separatists. It is exactly because they are so proud that they can't accept becoming anyone's lackey! Working for the BLM is a form of rebellion for them. If they can't join the mech industry as a successful mech designer, then they would rather burn it all it down!"

"What twisted logic is that!" Ves exclaimed!

"It is not a logical response, but rather an emotional one. Ansel's hyperintense focus on producing winners who can compete with the best has a very significant downside. The AUMD is very poor at raising mech designers who can cope with setbacks and losses. These aggrieved mech designers are too proud to lower themselves to working on those alternative careers, and the BLM is shrewd enough to offer them a substantial amount of power and influence in their cells!"

This sounded incredibly concerning to Ves. However, while it surprised him a lot that the BLM employed many disaffected graduates from Ansel, he still question what all of this had to do with his current mission.

"You mentioned this for a reason, right? What does this have to do with the situation at the KNG?"

"If there is anything amiss at the KNG, their collaboration with the BLM may not be limited to providing material support. There is a possibility that some of the mech designers working at the KNG's design complex are in cahoots with the BLM." Leland revealed.

This sounded paranoid even to Ves. In addition, even if something like this really went on, it was very hard to catch the colluding mech designers in the act. The help that these mech designers provided to the BLM could merely be confined to leaking some data on the KNG's mechs.

"It sounds like Flashlight is not very comfortable with the AUMD."

"We have a reason to be concerned. Ansel's influence in Bentheim's mech industry is substantial and pervasive. While most of our Senior Mech Designers have emerged from that school, a lot of bad apples have come from there as well."

Unfortunately, even if some of those bad apples ended up at the KNG, Ves didn't have the opportunity to investigate them all. While a couple of mech designers did in fact get sent to the manufacturing complexes from time to time in order to supervise the complex production operations, most of them just spent their times in the secretive design labs deep inside the KNG's design complex.

"So what do I have to do?"

"While Kadar and Neyvis are two very capable mech designers, it's impossible for them to extend their awareness everywhere. They spent much of their time either at their headquarters or their design complex. As for the manufacturing complexes, the only times they visit there is when they need to ready the

production lines for a major shift in production. Other times, they leave it to other mech designers to keep an eye there."

Ves learned from Leland that Kadar and Neyvis entrusted the overall functioning of each manufacturing complex to trusted subordinate mech designers.

Subsequently, if anything dubious happened at these sites, then those trusted mech designers would very likely be at the heart of those schemes.

"All of them are Ansel alumni with a lot of weight within the KNG." Leland mentioned. "While they don't have much influence in the design work, when it comes to production they are absolutely side bosses."

"Even so, being in charge of production is not as fulfilling as being able to design mechs." Ves observed. "Does the KNG really not allow any of their other mech designers to publish mech designs they developed themselves?"

"Nope. Publishing inferior products not only complicates their production efforts, but it will also tarnish their brand name. The KNG is very much a two-man show. Besides Kadar and Neyvis, no other mech designer is allowed to influence their product offerings."

At the end of the briefing, Leland left Ves alone to write his report for the Mech Corps. As he summarized his visit to the design complex, he couldn't help but think back on how a mech company ought to treat their mech designers.

"Sending mech designers to supervise the production or relegating them to grunt work in numerous design teams is not in their best interests."

The KNG basically treated their non-lead mech designers like commodities. For all of the company's claims of treating their employees well, they insidiously exploited them behind their polite facade.

It made Ves reflect on how he should shape his own company's policies regarding any mech designers he intended to hire.

From what he already observed at the KNG, he knew that any major mech company couldn't do without a design team. Ves already tasted the limits of operating solo and he simply couldn't dedicate that much time on designing individual mechs.

However, even if the LMC made use of design teams in the future, Ves needed to be very thoughtful about the treatment of his mech designers.

The central premise of both his design philosophy and his company was to elevate the dignity of mechs. Ves wanted his products to be treated with the respect afforded to living human beings.

However, for him to care so much about mechs, he should not neglect his own people. If Ves wanted to be consistent in his convictions, then he needed to find some way to allow his subordinate mech designers to express their design ability without compromising the best interests of the LMC.

"I'll have to think on this problem. There's no easy way to solve this conundrum."

Chapter 984 Blood Champion

As his visit to the KNG's design complex only stretched in the afternoon, after Leland left his quarters Ves still had the evening to himself. He decided to abuse his privileges again left the base after appropriating another military shuttle.

In any case, as a liaison mech designer, he didn't have to pay too much attention on staying at his posts. He wasn't assigned to a ship of a base after all, so hardly anyone cared if he departed without asking for leave!

"Where to, Mr. Larkinson?"

"Take me to the center of the Rain District."

The shuttle pilot actually turned around from his seat. "The Rain District, sir? That's not advisable. That district is the turf of the Blood Claws!"

"Yes, I know. I'll be perfectly safe there. It's not as if they would ever dare to hurt a man in uniform. Now stop asking questions and get this shuttle in the air!"

Even if he didn't have much free time to spend on Bentheim, Ves still wanted to get some private matters done. It was a rare opportunity for him to be able to run around on Bentheim while the war still went on, so how could he not abuse this privilege until it was bleeding and crying on the floor?

The shuttle spent a short time crossing above the city before it landed in the Rain District, a less-well off city district of Dorum. A lot of visitors and locals at the parking zone looked at Ves with askance as soon as he stepped out.

His service uniform looked completely out of place in the seedier part of the capital!

Ves merely smiled at the gawkers and began to walk along the main avenues of the district. Everywhere he walked, he drew many stares. Word would spread and footage of him would leak out. Perhaps many of them would wonder why he entered the Rain District in this getup alone, and the uncertainties from that would fuel the spread of his appearance.

While he didn't intend to catch the public's attention this way, it was a nice bonus even if it slightly tarnished his reputation for entering the Rain District.

After all, everyone and their mother knew that the Blood Claws held sway here. The gang owned many properties here through various dummy corporations, and they operated many businesses in the dark.

For example, Ves knew that the Blood Claws operated an underground mech arena as well as a black market here. The scale of both wasn't that big or extensive due to their fears of attracting too much attention from the

authorities. As long as these shady establishments didn't draw too much attention to themselves, the local authorities on Bentheim weren't inclined to spoil the party.

Ves couldn't help but smile at the implicit cooperation. What took place on Bentheim sounded no different than the shady businesses that operated in the Harkensen System.

The only point of consideration was that Bentheim cared a lot more about maintaining a clean reputation on the surface. As a legitimate port system, they derived most of their revenue from honest industry and legal trade.

The problem was that illicit activities always followed everywhere where the money flowed. Port systems drew even more gangs than usual because of the sheer amount of transactions that went on. Therefore, the dominant position the Blood Claws held in Bentheim's underworld was so strong that even the Planetary Guard closed their eyes to their activities as long as they upheld a social accord!

The three dominant gangs all effectively ruled their territories autonomously!

Having witnessed the blatant co-dependence of legal and less-than-legal activities, Ves knew that it reflected a sense of helplessness with regards to the authorities. Crime followed everywhere and have always existed since the dawn of time.

No matter if it was the galactic rim or the galactic center, plenty of people found ways to cheat the system or find a way to fulfill a need that the government frowned upon. Bentheim may be less safe and more chaotic with all the gangs vying for a slice of the pie here, but it could have been much worse if the Blood Claws didn't depress the violence on their turf.

Fighting was bad for business. While small rivalling gangs of lowlives constantly fought over the less desirable parts of Bentheim, a place like the

Rain District maintained relative order in order to make visitors feel safe enough to frequent their establishments.

Ves entered a run-down bar called the Three-Legged Mech.

"Oi, you that Larkinson fella?" A thug who waited near the entrance called.

"Yep."

"The Blood Champion told me to bring you upstairs. Let's go."

Ves followed the fellow up some steps in the dinghy but strangely homely bar. He drew countless stares from the thugs and other lowlives drinking at this grungy establishment.

Once upstairs, they entered a private room where a single other person had already sank on a couch with beer stains on it. The woman looked up at his arrival and raised a lazy hand.

"Yo."

"We haven't seen each other in years, and that's all you can say to me, Raella?"

"What do you expect, Ves?" His brash cousin said in a heated tone. "Do you want me to get all googly-eyed at your well-cut uniform and your impressive decorations? I left the Larkinsons because I want to pursue my own career instead of mindlessly joining the military like everyone else!"

"Whoa there, I just wanted to meet, cousin. I'm not here to preach to you or drag you back to the family."

"Huh! Seeing you in your uniform just pisses me off. It reminds me of all the other aunts and uncles who are disappointed in me for not following the family tradition. It didn't help that you tracked down my comm contact and ordered me to meet up with you. Just like that!"

"I remember I specifically sent you a request. If you didn't want to meet me, you could have just said no." Ves replied aggrievedly.

"Yeah right. Who the hell would be able to say no to the latest darling of the family? Except for that fellow Ghanso, you're the most decorated Larkinson of our generation!"

Ves should have felt proud of that, but Raella made it sound as if he became a mindless Larkinson drone who followed the family's tradition of volunteering for military service.

"I don't want to argue with you about this. Can we move on? It's been a long time since we've last met, and even if you cut ties with the family, we're still related to each other."

"...Fine. You better not talk about anything that pisses me off, though."

As Ves sat next to the mech pilot on the couch, he regarded her with a curious eye. She didn't appear too different since last time, but just like Ves, she had gained an edge in her demeanor. She also matured a bit, and seemed more assertive and confident than before.

"How are you faring with the Blood Claws."

"I'm doing great! I've won and lost my fair share of fights in the underground arenas. There's something delightfully blood-pumping about those fights."

"Were you ever at risk of dying?"

"Sure! I usually know when to eject or give up in time, though. It's an essential skill to learn while you're fighting a mech duel with almost no rules."

Ves felt as if she was understating the risks. Even if the underground arena duels didn't always end in death, the possibility of fatalities was still substantially higher.

Likely, the main reason why Raella survived up to now despite losing some fights was because she was an insider and a very capable mech pilot. The Blood Claws would be crazy to treat her like dirt. Her Larkinson mech pilot training gave her an edge over most of the rabble that tended to compete in these kinds of underground mech duels.

"The guy at the entrance called you a Blood Champion. What's that?" He asked.

"Oh, that? It's basically their word for a mech champion. I've done quite well for myself lately." She grinned at Ves. "All those hair-raising fights finally allowed me to showcase my dueling talents. I'm nothing like the mech pilot I was before. As a Blood Champion, I've entered into the middle ranks of the Blood Claws. While I'm not in charge of any businesses or anything, I get paid really well and get any mech I want."

"That sounds very generous. However, it doesn't sound as if you're getting all of that treatment for free."

"Oh, it only lasts as long as I'm alive and in fighting shape. I also have to represent the Blood Claws in ritual duels whenever they fight against their rivals."

While Raella sounded very nonchalant about the risks, Ves figured that she was constantly at risk of dying or coming away with severe injuries. While he wanted to lecture her about the idiocy she volunteered for, he held himself back. It wasn't as if serving in the war was any less risky right now, and she made her own choice.

After a bit of chitchat on how they were doing, Ves moved on to the main purpose of his visit.

"Raella, the reason I asked to meet with you is not just to see how you're doing. I wanted to ask a favor from you."

She raised her eyebrow at him. "Truly? The mighty Ves deigns to lower himself to my level to ask for help?"

"Don't make it sound like as if I look down on you. I never did!"

She threw a skeptical expression at him. "Yeah, right. Well, spit it out. What do you want?"

"I want to ask you to use your sway with the Blood Claws to gather all the information it has about a local mech company called the Kadar-Neyvis Group."

"Why the hell do you want something like that?"

"Right now, I've been assigned to the KNG as a liaison mech designer. I want to have a better understanding of the company, but it's hard to tell them to expose their dirty laundry to me. I figured that a gang as powerful and established on Bentheim as the Blood Claws knows more about the KNG than the local authorities. Therefore, could you please ask around and see if they're willing to hand over some of their dirt on the company to me? Quietly, please, I don't want anyone to find out."

Raella frowned deeply at his request. "It's really hard to do anything quietly within the organization. The Blood Claws is really large and I'm just part of their mech pilots. All the business stuff is handled by another part of the gang."

"Can you do it or not?"

She smirked. "Sure! Who do you think I am? I'm a Blood Champion! It sounds a little sad, but I'm one of their best mech pilots! Except for the old dogs who have fought at Monty the Beheader's side for decades, everyone respects my skills! I'm sure I can drop by at the organization's business offices and dig out the intel on that mech company for you. However... it'll cost you, Ves."

"Oh come on, aren't we family?"

"We are. That's why I haven't said no. I can't even promise you that I can get my hands on the dirt, but as long as you pay me back I'll do my best."

Ves thought for a while before he sighed. "As long as we're not talking about treason or something, then fine. What is it you want me to do?"

"I want you to give me three of your company's highly rated Crystal Lords. The silver label versions, not the crappy bronze label ones."

He almost grew sick. "Mechs don't grow on trees, you know? Do you know how many credits worth of mechs you're talking about? It's a much larger sum of money than you have ever spent!"

"I don't care! I want some mechs so I can give them to my seniors to curry favor with them. Besides, it'll help you out as well. The LMC and you will be able to get in the good books of the Blood Claws if you offered them this kind of tribute. All the other mech companies do something like this all the time, you know! That's how Bentheim really works! Any company who's too slow in offering tribute... well, they don't exist for long."

While Ves wasn't aware of the exact state of the LMC's finances, he figured that they shouldn't be fragile enough to go bankrupt if they 'gifted' three Crystal Lords to Raella. If that wasn't the case, then he could always compensate the company with his personal funds.

Even though the upfront cost of this repayment was very high, as long as it furthered the mission and therefore improve his relationship with Flashlight, it was all worth it. No matter how shady it all sounded, at the end of the day it was all for a good cause.

"Deal."

Chapter 985 Perplexing Business Strategy

In the following days, Ves went on a series of tours through the Kadar-Neyvis Group's manufacturing complexes. They owned four in total, spread across different parts of Bentheim.

Jeff brought Ves to the Haston Complex first. Situated in the poorest city of Bentheim, the surroundings looked awfully rough, but those who worked here seemed happy and grateful to be working for the KNG.

"It must be very hard to base production in Haston." Ves idly commented as he casually inspected the entire plant under the guidance of one of the presiding mech designers.

"This is the old production plant of Neyvis Mechs back before the merger." The mech designer said. "We are a familiar institution in Haston. The Neyvis Family has a good relationship with the local Haston communities. By working together with the locals, we've managed to avoid the travails that other mech companies suffer when they think they can just drop down a factory here to take advantage of the cheap labor."

"What does the Neyvis Family do?" Ves asked, even though he already knew the question due to his prior studies.

Jeff answered this question quickly and confidently. "The Neyvis Family is a familiar mainstay in the Bentheim business community. They have long been in the banking and finance sector. Their Industrial and Commercial Bank of Bentheim has invested in many mech companies as well as many grassroots businesses. Eventually, Antoine Neyvis entered the mech industry and achieved great success, propelling him all the way to become the new head of the family!"

"Does that mean that Mr. Neyvis is also in charge of the family's ICBB?"

"Not directly. The bank's shares belong to the family's estate, and every major decision requires the approval of the family. Nonetheless, the ICBB has increased their cooperation with the Kadar-Neyvis Group lately."

As a capital-intensive industry, the vast majority of mech company startups went heavily into debt to get their foot off the ground. The harsh competition and relatively high barrier for entry did not deter many hopeful young mech designers in trying to make it as a mech entrepreneur.

Most failed outright.

Many more barely managed to keep their heads above water.

However, the few wild successes paid off extremely well, especially if the bank held equity in the newly-founded mech companies.

These huge successes made it viable for banks to earn a profit despite investing in many failed ventures.

Even if too many mech companies they invested in failed for some reason or another, the banks usually claimed the collateral which would be put to good use in another company.

Ves figured one of the reasons why Neyvis Mechs managed to achieve success early on was because the Neyvis Family accumulated a substantial amount of insider know-how on how to operate a mech company.

Having invested in so many mech companies through the years and having witnesses so many successes and failures, the Neyvis Family already knew most of the pitfalls of the mech industry!

As Ves continued his tour throughout the Haston Complex, he became struck by the numerous production lines, large amounts of motivated personnel and the extremely complex supply chains intertwined in this central location.

The mech designer brought them to the rear section of the plants where warehouses and landing pads stored hundreds of freshly-fabricated frontline mechs packed in compact containers. Transports occasionally flew down to offload raw materials and pick up the mechs.

"The logistics of running a manufacturing complex that can pump out an arsenal of mechs is extremely intricate. We are involved with hundreds of suppliers, logistics firms and distributors who ship our mechs to where they are sold. Keeping our supply chains running with all of the uncertainties of war and business has been difficult, but we are more than up to the challenge!"

The Haston Complex shipped in a huge amount of raw resources and subsequently shipped out a large amount of cheap but very sizable mechs. This in turn meant that the KNG's logistical efforts at this particular complex was the most large-scale and intensive operation of the entire company!

From the areas where the mech designer took him, Ves did not see anything amiss, at least on the surface. The large amount of people, the tight spaces and the overall level of monitoring and inspection left very little room for individuals to smuggle anything in or out of the complex.

However, as long as a substantial amount of key personnel were involved, something shady could still happen under the noses of everyone else. If Ves wanted to dig any impropriety out, then he needed to look into some of the personnel susceptible to these schemes.

Unfortunately, he wouldn't be able to do so on this short visit.

"Thank you for the tour. Visiting this complex has opened up my eyes." Ves said.

"It is our pleasure to show off the KNG's splendor, Mr. Larkinson." The bland mech designer responded.

Ves visited the three other manufacturing complexes of the KNG in turn.

The Ansel Complex was just as large as the Haston Complex. It used to be the center of production of the old Kadar Group and still pumped out spaceborn mechs to this day.

While the frontline mechs produced by the Haston Complex mostly sold for about 4 to 8 million credits, the mechs at the Ansel Complex could be bought for around 15 to 30 million credits.

This was still an extremely competitive price point, and Ves figured the profit margins were already rather skinny even during the good times.

The workers at the Ansel Complex generally appear to be more competent and diligent in their work. Subsequently, they were also much better paid.

"Ansel is known as the mech capital of this planet." The local mech designer explained. "While Ansel is famous for hosting its premier mech university, it is also known for educating some of the most best mech technicians in the Republic. Most of our mech technicians working here at our Ansel Complex come from those institutions."

"They must be rather expensive to employ." Ves remarked.

"We are always known for our generous remuneration. We are always working hard to achieve the best possible quality in our output. The raving reviews and the excellent customer feedback of our spaceborn mech models proves that all of our efforts here has propelled the KNG to greater prominence!"

Ves nodded. The mech market did indeed appreciate the KNG's many offerings. They enjoyed good reputation for delivering good quality products.

However, Ves privately questioned whether all of these extra efforts were really worth it. Even though the good reputation helped them sell more mechs, would the additional revenue offset all of the extravagant costs incurred by employing so many highly qualified mech technicians?

The KNG already paid its employees above average industry rates and offered extremely generous benefits on top of that. Certainly, employee satisfaction and subsequently their productivity all rose to the top, but Ves couldn't help but suspect the KNG wasted far more money without getting enough in return.

To Ves, the mech company's overly generous treatment of their personnel had reached beyond the bounds of common sense!

It was as wasteful as employing one of the Lyrical Kitchen's top chefs for the sole purpose of warming up nutrient packs!

Frontline mechs never sold for very much. Subsequently, there wasn't much profit to be made out a single sale. The Haston Complex fabricated so many frontline mechs because the KNG needed to leverage their economy of scale to the utmost in order to make a decent living out of selling these low-value mechs.

As for their operations in Ansel, while Ves genuinely found the Ansel-educated mech technicians to be a pleasure to work with, they were paid much more than their regular counterparts.

Was it worth it to pay twice as much for an Ansel mech technician when they only performed twenty to forty percent better than some basic mech technician that barely graduated out of a local trade school?

Ves looked to his own business as an example. The LMC's first mech technicians consisted of a fair number of local mech technicians from Cloudy Curtain. Even though they weren't nearly as good as the mech technicians from Ansel or those working from the military, the LMC still managed to fabricate premium mechs just fine!

Therefore, Ves felt profoundly uncomfortable about all of the pampering the blue collar workers received.

He continued to feel that way when he quickly toured the KNG's two smaller complexes. Erected after the merger of the Kadar Group and Neyvis Mechs, the two newer sites attempted to accommodate the expanded needs of the rising mech company.

The Mosville Complex was a hybrid production and repair site, and served as the center of the KNG's after-sales support services. Not only did it produce a significant quantity of spare parts and various supplies, it also ran a substantial repair operation which constantly fixed up heavily-damaged mechs sent back by their customers.

The Dorum Complex on the other hand was the smallest but also the most extravagant. Even though the KNG excelled in selling cheap bulk mechs, they didn't entirely ignore the premium mech segments. Kadar or Neyvis regularly spent time here to design, develop and fabricate custom mechs, and even without them the plant still produced various specialty premium mechs for various purposes.

Overall, Ves found these two newer complexes to be more inefficient than the older ones. The Dorum Complex especially featured such low production volumes that he doubted it had ever turned a profit.

As for the Mosville Complex, Ves had much to say about the viability of their repair operations. Having supervised the extensive and continuous repair efforts of the Flagrant Vandal space and ground mechs, Ves was highly adept in the amount of manpower, expertise, supplies and time needed to repair the various kinds of damage that mechs tended to incur.

What Ves found most inefficient about the repairs being performed at Mosville was that the KNG allocated a substantial amount of manpower, resources and time to fix up cheap frontline mechs which incurred heavy battle damage. Many of them were even outright wrecked!

It was safe to say it cost a lot of time and resources to reconstruct these mechs, yet their inherently low value meant that the KNG couldn't charge full price to effect these repairs.

"The KNG also sells a huge amount of frontline mechs every year. The more mechs they sell, the more their customers will send them back for repairs and restoration."

Ostenably, the KNG sold its frontline mechs at bottom rock prices in order to earn a profit on their after-sales services. However, how much could they mark up their prices to service their cheapest products?

The mercenary corps and other customers that purchased these bargain bin mechs tended to be penny-pinching cheapskates. They would always compare prices on everything and never paid for anything that wasn't worth the cost.

Subsequently, the KNG couldn't charge too much for their repair services or otherwise those cheapskate mech owners would simply bring their damaged mechs to a cheaper repair business!

Although the quality between the two services differed quite substantially, most budget-minded mech owners probably found it wasteful to put their cheap mechs in the care of the KNG's well-trained but overpaid mech repairers!

As Ves finished his brief tours of all four manufacturing complexes, the questions in his mind continued to grow without abating.

The profligate way the KNG spent its money paired with its business strategy of focusing on selling large amounts of economy and budget mechs seemed incredibly contradictory.

"How can the KNG even expect to make a profit? Even if they are in the green, their wasteful spending ways means that their return on investment should be a lot more morose than comparable mech companies!"

Ves felt as if he was missing a crucial piece of the puzzle in the KNG's business strategy. What he really wanted to do right now was to storm into the KNG's headquarters, barge into their Financial Department and read through their financial records!

However, as a liaison mech designers sent to the KNG for the sole purpose of babysitting their military production activities, checking the company's finances fell outside of his purview.

As a private company, the KNG also didn't need to report their statements in public. Therefore, obtaining any accurate information on the true state of their finances would be very difficult.

Still, Ves had a feeling that understanding how the KNG's actually earned their money would help out his investigations.

Chapter 986 Fabrication

Back at his quarters at the military base, Ves explained his misgivings to his case officer.

Leland Toll listened calmly. "It is not so easy to peer through the accounts of a large mech manufacturer of this scale. The KNG is involved with thousands of stakeholders. From individual suppliers to massive conglomerates, each of them either obtain payment from the KNG or pays them to render a large volume of goods and services. While I'm not an expert in running a business, even I know it is impossible for any single person to get a complete grip on such a large company's financial state."

"I'm not asking for a complete record. It'd be swamped if I attempted to study all of their transactions. What I really want to obtain is their recent financial

statement. As long as I can obtain their balance sheet, income statement and cash flow statement, we'll know if their business strategy works as intended and if not, where they are really getting their money."

"Are you asking me to supply you with all of that financial data?"

"You're a Flashlight intelligence officer, right? Isn't it trivial for your agency to obtain those records?"

"As a private corporation, the Kadar-Neyvis Group indeed has to disclose some records to the state." Leland said with a wry smile. "However, it's a bit more delicate than you think. The KNG submits all of the necessary financial statements to the Ministry of Economic Development."

"Oh."

"Yes. MinEcDev is a particularly powerful ministry of the Republic, and they guard their territory extremely well. Even if we have planted agents in that ministry, they cannot casually rip out the relevant data from their databases."

This revelation emphasized how Kadar and Neyvis leveraged their connections to the point where their company was highly dependent on them. Ves already heard that the KNG maintained a close relationship with MinEcDev. The powerful ministry ostensibly offered a lot of financial assistance to the KNG to keep it alive during the current adverse economic climate.

"Does Flashlight has any clue where they get their money at all?"

Leland shook his head. "We aren't aware of any major inbound cash flows besides the company's own earnings and the financial assistance they received from the ministry. Even so, the financial statements they've submitted to MinEcDev might not even present the complete picture."

"It's pretty daring to lie to the ministry."

"As far as we are aware of, every mech company makes use of creative accounting to some extent. Right now, we don't have an accurate picture of the KNG's true financial state. Spotlight is supposed to keep tabs on the company, but the company's powerful connections to Rittersberg has left our colleagues leery of stepping on the KNG's toes."

Ves could hear the disdain in Leland's voice towards Spotlight. "How come that agency is so timid? I thought it's Spotlight's job to keep tabs on our own citizens and organizations. Shouldn't they be fearless in discharging their duties?"

A sneer appeared on Leland's face. "It's exactly because they're charged with watching our own people and organizations for treasonous behavior that they're so inconsistent. Many of the policymakers at Rittersberg have considerable economic interests throughout the Republic. How would they feel if Spotlight exposed all of their improper dealings by shining a light on them? The Bright Senate has constantly passed laws restricting the powers and privileges of our sister agency. In addition, political appointees have taken up a much more substantial role in the running of the agency at the top."

"In other words, you believe Spotlight's integrity and independence are both compromised."

"I wouldn't put it that strongly. Many of the people that work for Spotlight are genuine servants of the Republic. However, it's undeniable that Flashlight has taken on more and more cases that Spotlight used to handle."

Even though this was Leland's personal opinion, Ves became struck by how much rot had set in.

MinEcDev supposedly regulated the Republic's domestic industries. Instead, it morphed into a greedy entity that pursued its own profits above its stated goal as a regulator.

Spotlight should have kept tabs on its own citizens and organizations. Instead it turned into a toothless entity under the influence of the very same people it ought to keep an eye on the most!

"How can the Bright Republic tolerate such meddling?"

"Who in power can oppose these developments?" Leland asked back. "When it comes down to it, the Bright Senate that proposes and passes various laws and the cabinet that sets various policies are the ones responsible."

Basically, a conflict of interest from those in power caused various institutions to diverge from their intended role. Instead of serving the Republic as a whole, they instead benefited their masters that held the reins of power.

"So what does this have to do with our current mission?"

Leland sighed. "Flashlight is very concerned about these developments. The gutting of Spotlight particularly upsets us as the weakening of our main domestic intelligence agency exposes our state to various misdeeds of our own citizens. Therefore, your investigation is of vital importance. We MUST find evidence of impropriety at the KNG in order to shock the cozy, lacksadaisal establishment into action."

The fire of conviction burned within Leland's eyes. Ves found it to be very uncomfortable. "I'm working on it. While my tours at their various manufacturing and support complexes hasn't allowed me to detect anything egregiously amiss, there are several sketchy points about how they are run."

"Good. We don't have much time, so make sure to deliver a result to Flashlight within a couple of weeks."

"That's not enough time. I don't think I'll be able to dig up any dirty laundry in that short amount of time."

"You're a resourceful mech designer, Ves. I'm sure you can manage to come up with something. What Flashlight needs is evidence that the KNG is substantially involved with the BLM."

The way Leland phrased those words took on an oddly ominous tone. Ves narrowed his eyes in suspicion.

"What if I don't find any after two weeks?"

"Regardless of your findings, I expect you to submit a report that isn't empty."

"Even if all I've managed to ascertain is that the KNG is squeaky clean?"

"No company is completely spotless, Ves. I thought you of all people knew that. The KNG should have plenty of skeletons in their closet. As long as we have probable cause, we can move into action and thereby warn Spotlight and their political masters that they really ought to be doing a better job safeguarding the Republic. We can also kick the Ansel University of Mech Design down a notch while we're at it. Maybe they'll finally temper some of the arrogance they instill in their graduates."

It took longer than he ought to, but Ves understood now what Leland tried to imply to him. The conclusion shocked him! "You want me to lie in my report even if I haven't found anything wrong at the KNG! Investigating the KNG has never truly been about rooting any possible BLM involvement to Flashlight. Instead, you want to surprise the current establishment by crucifying one of their pet companies!"

"Well done, Ves! You've figured it out." Leland grinned at him while leaning closer. "Consider it a backup plan in case your investigation is going nowhere. It's best if we can make an example out of the KNG based on the truth, but we can still manage if you can only come up with fabricated evidence at the end of your investigation."

A creeping sense of horror swept through Ves' body as he realized how Flashlight already condemned the KNG even before they obtained any evidence of wrongdoing. This sort of action went way beyond Flashlight's mandate!

The worst case was that Leland expected Ves to be complicit in this radical scheme! After some thought, he finally understood why Flashlight wanted Ves to undertake the investigation instead of any other mech designer.

"I see now." He said in a hollow voice. "The true reason why Flashlight wants me on this mission is because I'm much more credible than any of the spooks that work for your organization. As a Larkinson and as a war hero who earned three distinguished awards, it's a lot harder for our political masters to dismiss the 'evidence' that I bring up. Do you really expect me to fabricate evidence that the KNG is involved with the BLM?"

"We do. We need this in order to further our aims." Leland stated simply but with force. He softened up a bit after a few seconds. "Just know that you'll be doing a huge service to Flashlight. We know it's a heavy burden to drag down your fellow mech designers on fabricated charges, but if you do this Flashlight will seriously owe you. We'll fulfill anything we've promised to you when you agreed to perform this mission."

After that, Leland left shortly after, giving Ves even more food for thought.

In fact, Ves hadn't shook off his utter shock at Flashlight's audacious intentions as of yet. It wasn't enough to look for any evidence of impropriety at the KNG! If Ves really found nothing substantial, would he really be forced to cook up false evidence that Flashlight could use as an excuse to crack down on the KNG?

"This is way too perverse. How can I condemn an innocent company to this kind of heavy treatment?"

Even if Flashlight couldn't shut down the company outright or deal with them openly, the damage to the KNG and their owners would still be incalculable!

"So this is the true face of Flashlight." Ves muttered with a short, unhinged laugh.

Major Verle warned him several times that Flashlight played hardball. Yet up to now, Ves hardly noticed anything extreme. Only now did Leland expose some of the military intelligence agency's murky depths.

By all rights, Flashlight planned to pull off an outright conspiracy if they didn't get the evidence that they wanted!

The shady intentions of Flashlight along with Ves' possible involvement in their scheme made him feel profoundly conflicted.

Right now, the KNG happened to fall in the crosshairs. Who could say that his LMC would be targeted next? Who could stop anyone from coming up with trumped-up charges to bring down his company?

The search of BLM collusion was a sideshow at best to Flashlight. What really mattered to them was their political rivalry against the government who they perceived to be too corrupt to police their own misbehaving magnates and companies!

Ves somewhat regretted accepting the mission, but he had already cast his lot with Flashlight. Succeeding in the mission, whether through finding or 'fabricating' evidence of separatist involvement, served his own interests.

"I'm not part of the exclusive club of politicians and officials that run the Bright Republic. Their policies don't benefit me and most of the government institutions won't favor me. I can't even make use of the connections of the Larkinson Family to help me out because we simply aren't that influential compared to the bigger and more prosperous families."

Since Ves had no hope of aligning himself to the ranks of the established elite, his best bet was still to cast his lot with Flashlight. Unlike Spotlight, Flashlight still held plenty of teeth because they were vital to the Republic's war effort against the Vesians.

Therefore, becoming one of their allies or external collaborators as they called it allowed his company and himself to enjoy solid backing from the state. The murkier portion of the state, to be sure, but one that comfortably stood on its own.

Even so, Ves decided to push aside his decision on the matter. There was still time left for him to uncover real evidence during his cover role as a liaison mech designer. He just needed to intensify his efforts in the coming days.

"I should be getting some dirt on the company from Raella soon enough."

Chapter 987 Coveted Demographic

The thought of handing over three Crystal Lords for free pained Ves a lot, but Raella didn't lie when she stated that this was how Bentheim worked.

However, while unpleasant, the tribute he instructed the LMC to hand over directly benefited Raella's position within the Blood Claws.

Ves knew what she was doing by demanding this request. She intended to raise her value within the criminal enterprise by calling attention to her ongoing association with Ves and his multibillion credit mech company.

Even though she renounced her ties to the Larkinson Family, blood was thicker than water! If Raella proved to her superiors that she could ask Ves for favors, then they would surely place more importance to her in their ranks.

"I'll also benefit as well."

With Raella, Ves had a trustworthy contact inside one of the biggest gangs on Bentheim. His previous request to her was just one example in which he could

leverage his connection with Raella to obtain something he needed from the Blood Claws.

The value of this connection was extremely difficult to come by for any other mech company. It wasn't every day a relative of a business owner outright joined the ranks of one of the three major gangs of Bentheim!

Even so, Raella became a huge black sheep to the Larkinson name for that reason. While it would have been okay to meet with her occasionally, Ves couldn't associate himself too closely to her. The press probably already had a lot of things to say about his earlier visit to the Rain District, but at least his new status as a war hero allowed him to get away with the act.

"I shouldn't push it too much, though. Next time I'll meet Raella I should ask her to come to me instead of the other way around."

Since he had some time left, he began to browse the galactic net. Over the past couple of days, his appearances in public already garnered a considerable amount of interest. The only problem that stymied the news portals was that when they looked up his records, all of the details about how he earned his decorations was firmly confidential.

So the various news portals began to speculate a number of wild tales instead.

"Urgh. Don't they have better things to do?"

Tales about punching aliens in the face, rescuing stranded Brighter women in the frontier and more started to make the rounds. They attributed all sorts of insane feats to him without possessing any shred of evidence.

Fortunately, only the sleazier rags deigned to exercise their imagination. The more respectable journalists merely stopped their stories there. This also meant they stopped reporting on Ves and moved on to other news.

"However, I haven't disappeared entirely." He grinned.

Small ads that tied Ves' recent appearance to his LMC could be found on nearly every news portal that reported on him. While these ads weren't too extravagant and would disappear in a week, right now they served their purpose in converting his raised public profile into increased exposure to his mech company!

He began to search for mention of the LMC in the various publications and found that it garnered abruptly more attention!

THE LIVING MECH CORPORATION: A HIDDEN GEM

THE MECH COMPANY FOUNDED BY A WAR HERO

VETERANS LOVE THE LMC'S TWO MECH MODELS!

Ves especially felt gratified by headlines and features where various veterans showed an increased interest in his products. He knew that fellow servicemen appreciated his awards the most, and therefore felt much more favorably inclined towards him and his products compared to the average civilian.

"Veterans make up an important demographic category in the mech market." Ves remarked with a smile.

A lot of former servicemen discharged from the Mech Corps still piloted mechs in the private sector. The ones that lusted for battle and excitement joined a mercenary corps while those who pursued steadier careers opted to work for a security company.

All of those respectable outfits loved to hire military veterans. Mech pilots who survived the war had proven their chops in battle and injected valuable battle-proven experience into their ranks. In addition, their systematic training left little doubts about their competence.

Ves once heard the Larkinsons talk about how this was a deliberate measure. The Bright Republic invested a lot of money and resources in training their mech pilots, so letting them go after a tour or two sounded wasteful.

However, if these discharged veterans subsequently joined the various private outfits of the Bright Republic, wouldn't that bring them more in line with the state?

Overall, veteran mech pilots fought better, harder and with more discipline than their non-military colleagues. Most of those outfits in fact tended to be founded by veterans or eventually came into the control of one through proving their ability to fight and light!

Thus, to say that all of the local mercenary corps and security companies was completely separate from the military wasn't entirely through. The influential and pervasive network of ex-servicemen formed a strong but unobtrusive means for the state to continue to exert control over these 'independent' outfits.

"That also makes them one of the most coveted demographics to win over." Ves chuckled. With Marcella, who was a veteran of the previous war herself, taking the initiative to blitz the local news portals with a concerted market campaign, Ves expected to become known to every veteran within a week! "And many of these veterans have buying power! The LMC will be sure to receive a lot of orders!"

For now though, his attempts to promote the LMC was ultimately a sideshow compared to his current mission. If he couldn't give Flashlight the evidence they sought, how should he deal with Leland's request?

Should he play along and fabricate fictitious evidence, or should he honestly report he found nothing of concern?

"The key is whether Leland speaks for himself, his superior within Flashlight or the entire intelligence agency."

Ves regretted that he missed the opportunity to clarify this particular point. Even so, a snake like Leland would probably lie or provide a nonanswer to this question.

He had very little to go on to determine whose interests he served if he went ahead and fabricated evidence.

"If the Ministry of Economic Development and Spotlight are susceptible to corruption, how can Flashlight remain an exception?"

Unfortunately, Ves knew too little about Flashlight to ascertain its true state. He only possessed a shallow relationship with them so far, and would remain firmly at arms length.

His intuition couldn't tell him the answer either, but he faintly believed that Leland hadn't gone rogue with regards to this additional request. If Leland hadn't distorted the facts too much, then kicking over the KNG would certainly provide a very welcome wakeup call to the various institutions that care more about their own profits than their actual duty.

Ves sighed and laid down on his bed. When he thought about fabricating damning evidence to drag the KNG through the mud, he couldn't help but recall the first time he met the happy family.

Estella's motherly care and Antoine's fatherly concern over their two lovely children touched his heart and melted some of the harshness that built up during his previous travails.

How could he bring so many troubles to such a loving and sincere family?

There was a small, yearning desire in his heart to start such a family himself. He too wanted to seek a more fulfilling life.

Still, when he thought about all of the benefits he could obtain from Flashlight, he regained his determination. Ridding himself from the shackles of the Ministry of Economic Development benefited him directly while absolving the Kadar-Neyvis of any crimes gave him no favors at all.

His self-interest came above any fanciful notion of morality. "As long as it doesn't happen to me, I can live with my actions."

He fell asleep shortly after.

The next day, he regained his composure and pushed the thorny matter to the side. Ves finally received a message from Raella stating that the LMC completed the transfer of three precious mechs in her care.

"Do you have the item I requested?" Ves asked over the comm.

"Yeah sure. It took a few favors of my own. You're lucky that I'm kind of a big deal in the Blood Claws or else they wouldn't have let me in at all!"

The two Larkinson cousins quickly agreed on a place and time where they could meet.

After freshening himself up, he rode a military shuttle to the Entertainment District where he previously reserved a private room at one of the upscale establishments there in his personal capacity.

Bots started to bring in various sumptuous breakfast dishes when Raella arrived. "Wow, that's some fancy looking chow! Don't mind if I take a bite!"

As they began to eat breakfast, Raella nonchalantly threw a data chip at Ves. He hastily dropped his fork in order to catch it in the air. Even though a data chip couldn't be damaged so easily these days, he didn't want it to drop in his glass of coffee!

"Is this...?"

"Yup. That's what you wanted."

The two were tactful enough not to mention the exact nature of the data chip's contents. Previously, they met in a bar at the Rain District, which was pretty much under the control of the Blood Claws.

This restaurant on the other hand was either completely independent or served some other influence on Bentheim. Either way, it would be a very bad idea to talk about sensitive matters without something like a signal jammer at work.

Even so, as long as they talked about the topic in a vague and indirect enough manner, it didn't hurt too much to ask some questions.

"How much do the Blood Claws know?" He asked carefully.

Raella munched on a croissant while speaking. "From what I gather, the people you wanted me to look into mainly fall pay their dues to the Peace Association."

"One of the Big Three?"

"The very same." Raella confirmed. "From what I gather, Three-Eyes Jackson who heads the Peace Association is an acquaintance of the family of one of the two."

"I see."

Raella probably meant that the Neyvis Family who owned the Industrial and Commercial Bank of Bentheim possessed a definitely connection to one of the biggest three gangs of Bentheim!

The Blood Claws had two rivals of roughly equal strength.

The Peace Association under Three-Eyes and the Fellowship of the Deprived under Great Siren Kjande all maintained a tenuous peace with the Blood Claws. The three of them collectively carved out the planet's choicest turfs

among themselves, leaving the scraps that wasn't worth their attention to the rabble in the dirt.

"How far has the Peace Association's influence stretched?" He asked.

"Dunno. You can read that for yourself in the data chip. The Blood Claws constantly keeps an eye on their rivals, so you can be sure the intel I brought you is reliable. From what little I went through, their cozy relationship stretched back decades."

Ves nodded. While such a long and evidently fruitful relationship sounded very shady, it was just a normal business practice on Bentheim. No court in the Republic would condemn the KNG for maintaining a harmonious relationship with Bentheim's underground.

If the KNG fell for this reason, then pretty much every other company on the planet was equally as guilty!

Still, due to the improper nature of this relationship, the KNG needed to be very discreet about the exact ways they paid their tribute to the Peace Association. If the KNG already did something shady on the side, who was to say they didn't take it a step further and used the same means to collaborate with the BLM?

Obtaining this intel would help him narrow down where the KNG performed all of their shady activities. This not only saved him a lot of time by pointing him to the most suspicious aspects about the company, but it also gave him valuable ammunition for a possible plan B.

After all, mention of smuggling mechs off the books to the Peace Association could easily be distorted into an accusation of smuggling mechs the Bentheim Liberation Movement!

Chapter 988 Underground Connection

After Ves returned to the base, he studied the contents of Raella's data chip. As promised, she really did retrieve a fair amount of dirt on the Kadar-Neyvis Group and also the Neyvis Family for that matter.

Ves decided to look into the Neyvis Family first, because the KNG could never have grown so fast and with such momentum without the capital to back up their ambitions.

"Turns out the Neyvis Family has been laundering money for the Peace Association." He immediately recognized.

Money earned through illicit means couldn't be spent so easily. Running them through legitimate businesses helped underground organizations clean up their dirty money so they could spend it in the open without drawing an excessive amount of scrutiny.

"I guess it's too much to expect a bank on Bentheim to keep their noses clean."

To their credit, money laundering only formed a small proportion of the Industrial and Commercial Bank of Bentheim banking activities. It could even be said that the additional money injection allowed the ICBB to be more generous in investing in some of the local businesses with promise.

Through increasing the circulation of money in Bentheim's economy, the ICBB therefore formed a positive influence to the planet.

"Many other banks are probably engaging in similar schemes." Ves concluded.

The ICBB and the Neyvis Family's involvement in laundering money for one of the Big Three gangs of Bentheims made Ves apprehensive. If Ves ever damaged their business interests, then he'd be sure to draw the ire of the Peace Association.

Despite its seemingly benevolent name, the gang led by Three-Eyes Jackson could be just as cruel and ferocious as the Blood Claws!

"Pissing off the Peace Association is a very bad idea."

The Neyvis Family's relationship with the Peace Association extended to the Kadar-Neyvis Group. The mech company enjoyed a considerable amount of attention and protection from the gang since its inception!

"On top of the KNG's political, military and local connections, it also has a firm bond with Bentheim's underground!"

The sheer amount of connections the KNG forged almost made Ves faint. The more people cared about the company, the more people Ves pissed off if he dragged the company through the mud!

It seriously made him consider Leland's request yet again. Fabricating evidence in the absence of any legitimate evidence of treasonous behavior incurred numerous powerful enemies!

The calculus didn't seem very favorable to him. Was the backing of Flashlight really worth pissing off so many powerful figures?

After a moment of thought, Ves eventually narrowed his eyes in determination. "The only way to thread the needle is to dig up evidence of actual misdeeds. I don't believe a mech company of this size, background and history is completely clean. There has to be something fishy!"

The strange way that Kadar and Neyvis ran their company just didn't mesh well with Ves for some reason. The business of producing and selling lower-end mechs en masse pressured mech manufacturers into operating as lean and efficient as possible.

Yet the KNG seemed to reject that approach in their employment policies.

"Where do they get the money?" Ves asked himself.

The KNG spent lavishly on their employees, yet Marcella told him that she believed the company actually made a loss for every cheap mech they sold!

At such a time, the KNG should have tightened their belts and streamlined their operations, but Ves actually witnessed preparations for future expansions!

The company's cozy relationship with the Peace Association couldn't account for the entire shortfall. As Ves read through the intel meticulously gathered by the Blood Claws, the KNG only allocated around five percent of its profits and production capacity to servicing the Peace Association's needs.

This sounded like a reasonable proportion to which the KNG could just attribute as 'inefficiencies' or 'spillage' in their administration. Handing over five percent of their stuff to a gang sounded like an unofficial industry standard for large companies.

In exchange for providing tribute, the gang subsequently extended their protection to the company. The documents provided by Raella frequently stated that none of the Blood Claws should ever touch the KNG and the Neyvis Family because the Peace Association would certainly retaliate!

Every business operating in an area where gangs held sway needed to accommodate the local powers. This was an unavoidable reality. Even his LMC continued to pay tribute to Walter's Whalers!

"In general, the KNG spends a lot more money than they get from the Peace Association. It wouldn't make sense for the gang to be generous enough to lose money to the KNG. Extra cash infusions by the ICBB can't explain it all because the bank needs to remain profitable as well."

This returned Ves to his initial question. Where did the KNG get the money to make up for their shortfall?

From the Ministry of Economic Development? Unlikely.

"Even if Marcella stated that the KNG has received generous subsidies and interest-free loans, the ministry is still a profit-seeking institution at heart."

From his logical deductions, MinEcDev wouldn't violate their basic interests when showing political favor to a particular company.

So where did that leave the company?

"Maybe I should look at their production capacity first."

He recalled the sights he saw when touring their manufacturing and repair complexes. He pulled up the reports he wrote after visiting the facilities and tried to draw mental maps for each of the four sites.

He loosely compared the figures of their claimed production capacity to how many mechs these complexes could actually pump out when running at full tilt.

This involved a lot of educated guesswork, but Ves was very familiar with how much time, manpower, resources and time it took to produce a single mech.

After he spent a full hour on projecting the theoretical maximum production capacity of each complex, he found out that there was around twenty percent left to spare.

"Either they lied when they told me their official production figures, or they are spending that twenty percent on producing off-the-books mechs." He guessed.

Ves ruled out the possibility that the complexes all ran below their maximum capacity. From what he personally seen of the hectic but tightly-run operations at all four sites, every available workplace saw an abundant amount of activity.

"The KNG is also in the process of expanding the facilities of all of their complexes. A company would only do so when there's no free capacity left to spare."

Of course, Ves might have made a miscalculation somewhere and overestimated the effective production capacity of the KNG's complexes, but he didn't think so. The company was too well-run! The productivity of their well-remunerated employees was near the top of the local industry standard!

Perhaps the key to answering the question where the KNG made up their shortfall was to look at how they made use of this twenty percent production capacity. Perhaps five percent could be attributed to providing tribute to the Peace Association, but where did that leave the remaining fifteen percent?

Ves simply didn't believe that a tightly-run company like the KNG just left that fifteen percent on the wayside!

Even so, they could have spent that fifteen percent production capacity for anything, from accumulating lots of spare parts to pad their inventory to selling more off-the-books mechs to various the various gangs in Bentheim.

"For the coming days, I should spearhead my investigation into finding out where this spare capacity is being spent."

He did exactly that as he revisited the manufacturing complexes in his capacity as a liaison mech designer.

Of the four complexes, the KNG allocated the least amount of military production at their Dorum Complex.

Therefore, Ves could not visit this facility with the excuse that he was overseeing the production of mechs for the Mech Corps seeing as there was none there.

Nonetheless, visiting the Haston, Ansel and Mosville Complexes under Jeff's constant company didn't leave Ves with enough liberties to dig in too deep in areas that had nothing to do with the production of military mechs.

It was inspiring to Ves to see how the KNG handled the production of so many different kinds of military mechs. The Mech Corps imposed strict standards on their production, something which Ves used as an excuse to make a thorough inspection in this area.

He reviewed the records, interviewed key personnel and spent hours observing the work being done on fabricating the mechs destined for military use.

Besides doing his due diligence as a representative of the Mech Corps, his deep inspections also provided more data points which he used to corroborate his estimation of the KNG's true production capacity.

Each time he returned from his visits and revised the numbers, his initial conclusion didn't sway, though it trended downwards a bit. "There's around ten to fifteen percent spare capacity lying around."

It different from site to site. The company ran a very tight ship at the Haston Complex. As the center of production of all of their cheap, low-margin mechs, it was very important for the KNG to avoid unnecessary expenses.

Besides paying the Haston mech technicians a lot more generously than their competitors, the company generally did a good job keeping the Haston Complex running smoothly.

The Ansel Complex on the other hand fell somewhere in the middle. The highly capable Ansel mech technicians ensured that every spaceborn mech that rolled off the production lines adhered to a high standard of quality. However, they tended to be a bit too perfectionistic about their work and didn't deliver mechs as fast as possible.

"Even so, the very low rate of errors means that the Ansel Complex doesn't have to go back to fix them. It's rather inspiring to see them work."

Ves dreamt of running the LMC's Mech Nursery like the KNG's Ansel Complex even as he decried the cost. Still, he learned so many lessons on how the KNG ensured a high volume of production of many different mech models at a time while maintaining an excellent level of quality. Even if he didn't apply all of the practices in the LMC, just a handful of clever methods would be enough to raise the Mech Nursery's efficiency as it slowly expanded its scope of production!

Compared to the large and established Haston and Ansel Complexes, the Mosville Complex raised the most questions to Ves. As a hybrid site dedicated to producing spare parts and servicing heavily-damaged mechs, the variety of stuff going in and out was extremely hard to track.

According to the intel gathered by the Blood Claws, the Peace Association's influence here was the greatest.

"Lots of mechs go in and out. Lots of parts go in and out. Lots of materials go in and out." Ves described his observations of that complicated location. "The higher the complexity, the higher the level of confusion among the workers. Hardly anyone there has a total picture of what goes on there, including the residential mech designer in charge."

More stuff going in and out meant more openings to fudge the numbers or smuggle things out without drawing attention.

The main complication here was that the highly complex supply chains running through the Mosville Complex prevented any single person from acting out without permission. In order to divert a significant amount of spare capacity to off-the-books activities, it required the collusion of at least dozens

of people, ranging from mech technicians to the security guards in charge of monitoring the facilities for impropriety.

"Are all of them in it?" He asked himself.

Probably not. If he ran something like this, he would have limited most of the shady activities to a trusted work crew.

As a fairly new addition to the KNG, the personnel working at the Mosville Complex consisted of a mix of old hands and recent hires from the city. When Ves looked over each work crew, he found one large group of mech technicians to consist almost entirely of old hands from Neyvis Mechs before the merger.

An experienced chief technician called Errel Nyquist headed this team of experienced mech technicians.

Chapter 989 Chief Technician Nyquis

Ves felt as if he acted out the role of an old-school detective in dramas as he investigated Chief Technician Nyquist.

The only problem was that Ves wasn't a detective, nor could he borrow his official authority to conduct his investigation openly. He needed to be discreet and circumspect in order to hide his true intentions from the Kadar-Neyvis Group.

Above all else, he could never let them suspect that he worked on behalf of an intelligence agency!

Fortunately, the scope of Chief Technician Nyquist's work also included the restoration of military mechs.

While mech regiments possessed robust repair operations, as Ves personally witnessed when he served aboard the Wolf Mother and subsequently took on the position of temporary head designer, they only possessed a limited amount of capacity.

Sometimes, a major battle which drew thousands of casualties and wrecked hundreds of mechs overwhelmed the repair capabilities of the mech regiments. It would take months for the mech regiment to restore the mechs back to working condition!

As long as they could ship their wrecked and damaged mechs back to Bentheim efficiently, why not make use of the abundant amount of repair capacity there?

This calculus resulted in a significant amount of military repair orders for the KNG's Mosville Complex. Of course, the KNG mainly repaired copies of mech models that it produced itself, as they were very familiar with its construction. The Mosville Complex also possessed an abundant stock of spare parts that saved the repair crews a lot of time in putting the military mechs back together.

Naturally, the delicate nature of entrusting the repairs and restoration of military assets to a civilian mech company required stringent controls. Even outside a liaison mech designer like Ves, the work being done on military mechs also involved other active servicemen.

Before Ves approached Chief Nyquist, he first wanted to talk to the highest-ranking serviceman sent to supervise the repair activities.

"I am Senior Mech Technician Darryl Roland, sir." The man saluted Ves even though he wasn't obligated to do so.

Ves eyed the mech technician and noticed the tell-tale signs of injury, even if he did a good job of hiding it. "Are you hurt?"

"Just some old injuries, sir. The war's been pretty bad to me. Got both of my legs blown off when the Vesians bombarded the carrier I was on with missiles. The docs regrew my legs, but it's easier said than done to work them in. Together with my other injuries, I probably need another year before the Mech

Corps sends me back to my mech regiment. In the meantime, I'll enjoy this vacation while it lasts."

"Alright Darryl. I just want to talk about your work, is that alright?"

"You're the boss. I'll provide whatever you want, sir." The man said diligently.

Ves couldn't help but smile. His new reputation as a distinguished mech designer and war hero already saved him a lot of effort in earning Darryl's trust.

"Let's begin with your overall impression of the workers at the KNG. What do you think of the mech technicians, managers and everyone else who works here?"

The man shrugged. "Kind of normal, I suppose. They're not so different from the mech technicians back at our mech regiment. They're a bit more corporate in their priorities, but they've always done right when it comes to doing their part to help the war effort, sir."

That didn't tell Ves anything new. "Tell me one thing that dissatisfies you most about the Mosville workers. Don't be shy and don't hold back."

Obviously, Darryl didn't want to badmouth the people he worked alongside with, so Ves needed to be a bit more direct to force a critical answer out of the disabled mech technician.

"Well... it's awfully busy here. Even though the company planned some expansions down the road, work on that has been slow on account of how little free space there is left. Everyone is trying to squeeze in more work. The KNG's mech technicians do what they can to keep up their quotas for the mech regiments, but there is already so much going on that they can only do so many things at a time, sir."

Hearing this perked up Ves. It reinforced his own observations and strengthened his estimation of the KNG's utilization of its production capacity.

"So it's all hands on deck at the Mosville Complex?"

"Yes, sir. Recently the company went on another hiring spree, picking up various mech technicians laid off from the many mech companies that shut their doors in recent times. It's not that easy to integrate them into the KNG, and they can only be entrusted with the least important duties for now."

"Tell me about the workers in charge of working on the damaged military mechs sent back from the frontlines."

"Oh, they're a pleasure to work with. They don't try to shirk their duty and they don't cut that many corners. Ahem, even if they do, I always make sure to call them out, sir."

"Sure, sure." Ves dismissed that remark. "Give me your impressions of all of the chief technicians you've worked with. What are their quirks, how do they work, what are their good and bad points?"

Darryl began to ramble about the many chief technicians in charge of various aspects and work crews. There weren't that many of them, but each of them played a vital role.

At some point, Darryl came to Errel Nyquist, the chief technician that Ves most wanted to hear about.

"Chief Technician Nyquist is a veteran of the previous war. Served at a frontline mech regiment just like me. That makes it a real pleasure to work with him, as he understands the needs of the Mech Corps best. Many times, he even argued back against the managers on our behalf, sir."

"So you have a good relationship with Chief Nyquist?"

"Oh, we're practically friends! We regularly meet up for a drink in downtown Mosville every week along with some other buddies! Errel is a good man, both to the company and to the Mech Corps. This is also why the company entrusted him with repairing the most important military mechs shipped back from the frontlines, sir."

The glowing praise that Darryl continued to pile up on Chief Nyquist made Ves rather uncomfortable. He suspected that Nyquist deliberately grew close to Darryl in order to shape the injured serviceman's perception of the company.

This tainted the active serviceman's opinions. Ves probably couldn't get any unbiased information from this talk.

His mood lowered a bit and after asking a few more perfunctory questions, he dismissed Darryl.

As the mech technician awkwardly walked back to his job with his newly grown legs, Ves tried to figure out how to approach the pivotal Chief Nyquist. Obviously, a veteran mech technician who advanced to chief technician would be anything but clueless.

"Maybe I should just talk to him and go from there."

He decided to call up Chief Nyquist for a meeting. When the man dropped his current work and came up to Ves, he looked mightily irritated.

"Just because you've been sent by the Mech Corps doesn't give you the right to go pull workers off their jobs."

For some reason, Ves already earned the man's ire. It turned out the recognition he received from the Mech Corps only helped him up to a point.

In cases like these, Ves knew that he should put up a firm and unyielding front. He could not let this chief technician dominate this conversation. "Chief Nyquist, as a liaison it is important for me to gain a thorough and complete

understanding of all of the work being done for the Mech Corps. You're the most senior and trusted chief technician in this complex, so I'd like your cooperation in helping me gain a better picture of how the KNG contributes to the Mech Corps."

Chief Nyquist shrugged. "I don't know what to say. We've partnered up with five Bentheim mech regiments, taking care of most of their military mechs. As of now, we've partnered up with the 5th Storm Enders of the 2nd Bentheim Division, the 1st Volari Starhawks and the 6th Mosville Mainstays of the 3rd Bentheim Division and the 3rd Carousel Clowns and the 5th Sparky Nuts of the 7th Bentheim Division. I'm a Sparky Nut myself, so I'm proud to serve my old mech regiment from Bentheim!"

Ves was familiar with all of the mech regiments that Nyquist mentioned. The 1st Volari Starhawks especially caught his attention because of the rise of Ghanso Larkinson, one of his cousins who seemed to have propelled himself into the ranks of expert candidates!

The thought of the KNG as the main supplier of Ghanso's mechs put Ves into an awkward position. As far as their diligence went to meeting the needs of the Mech Corps, Ves had very little to complain about. In fact, the KNG probably went above and beyond the expectations set by the state and made sure to deliver soundly fabricated mechs that were all robust enough to survive the rigors of war.

Dragging down a patriotic mech company that treated its obligations to the military with reverence put a foul taste in his mouth. Ves tried his best to keep his thoughts hidden in front of Chief Nyquist.

"Even if the Mosville Complex is servicing the needs of five mech regiments at once, this site is way too big to spend all of your time on repairing their assets. How much of this site's repair capacity is being spent on military mechs?"

"I'd say about twenty-five to thirty-five percent." The chief answered easily. "We're doing all of the repairs at cost. That's a lot of capacity that we could have used on more profitable jobs. In fact, no company ever manages to break even, really. There's depreciation, wasted opportunities, unmet demand and more that all drags down the company's profitability. However, we have all done our duty to the state without complaint."

"And I'm very thankful for that." Ves repeated, this time sounding much more sincere about it. He did genuinely recognize the KNG's earnest efforts.

"However, you mentioned unmet demand. Since up to thirty-five percent of the company efforts are allocated away from meeting the needs of your customers, I imagine you are hurting quite a lot."

"Not as much. With the war, some outfits are taking part while others have skedaddled. Many mech pilots have also been lured into enlisting in the Mech Corps, so there's less demand for mechs."

"A lot of mech companies shut down as well, though. There's less competition so each company enjoys a greater share of the pie."

"That doesn't sound as impressive when the pie has shrunk by thirty percent or more."

As Ves continued to ask other questions about his work, Chief Nyquist kept answering only the minimum necessary. Getting pertinent information out of this man was very tough, especially since Ves couldn't reveal his true intentions.

He found little opportunity to talk about his work outside of the company's obligation to the Mech Corps.

After Ves finally dismissed the chief technician, he tried his best to keep the frown off his face. While he didn't know what he wanted to get out of this

conversation, he felt as if he heard nothing except for what the KNG wanted him to hear.

"What a loyal company man." He sighed.

This only strengthened his conviction that Chief Nyquist served as the lynchpin to the KNG's illicit activities at the Mosville Complex. For some reason, Ves figured there was something more to Nyquist than his loyalty and his background as a former serviceman of the Sparky Nuts.

"Who is he, really?"

Fortunately, he wasn't alone in his investigation. At the end of the day, Ves returned to his quarters at the military base and met up with Leland for their daily briefing.

He put forth his request to his case officer.

"I want you to investigate Chief Technician Errel Nyquist who works at the KNG's Mosville Complex."

"Why?"

"Because if anything shady is going around at that site, he's sure to be involved. It will help me out in my investigation if you could handle this on your end."

"I'll see what I can do, Ves. He should have a detailed record if he's a former serviceman." Leland stared intensely at him. "Just remember that time is running out. Right now, I'm not very satisfied with the lack of progress on your part. My superiors expect a full report at the end of your investigation. You better be ready to give them one."

Ves got the message, as much as he didn't want to. "Understood. I will be sure to meet their expectations, one way or another."

Chapter 990 Integrity

Flashlight worked quickly. At the start of the next day, Ves woke up to a data pad placed onto his desk terminal. He quickly picked it up and began to read its contents.

"Chief Nyquist's record!"

It was a fairly complete one at that. It began to describe all of the official events of Nyquist's life, from his birth, to his enrollment into a technical school, his enlistment in the Mech Corps, his service record of his time with the Sparky Nuts and his honorable discharge after the war.

As Ves read through the record, he found a lot of notable points that enriched his understanding of his current subject, but none bore much relevance to his investigation.

"Nowhere in this record states that he has any connections to any other entities."

His extensive but mostly boring record only tied him strongly to the Sparky Nuts and Neyvis Mechs, which eventually transitioned into the Kadar-Neyvis Group.

However, this time Ves' intuition slightly encouraged him to question Chief Nyquist's background. There was something about the chief technician's shifty ways in deflecting yesterday's questions. It felt a bit too practiced and deliberate.

While that wasn't enough reason to mark out Chief Nyquist as a suspicious fellow, Ves thought there might be more to him than his clean record suggested.

Despite the pressure on him to dig up something concrete on the Kadar-Neyvis Group, Ves did not spend all of his time on his investigation.

Besides his side activities in promoting his public profile in the hopes of increasing the public's interest in the LMC, he also got back in touch with another Larkinson.

"Ves! Looks like my favorite cousin is doing well! I'm really impressed with your uniform!"

"Melinda!" Ves smiled and greeted her at an establishment in the Entertainment District. He immediately noticed the new bars on her uniform. "You're a captain of the Planetary Guard now?"

"I have been for more than a year." She wearily replied. "It's not as good as it sounds. My responsibilities have quadrupled, and it's already a hectic job trying to keep the peace on this planet. There are hundreds of major incidents happening all over Bentheim every single day that require the intervention of our mechs."

"Even so, you're one of the few Larkinsons of our generation to make it to the rank of mech captain."

"Pah, compared to your accomplishments, this is nothing." She dismissed his praise and tried to remain sober. "The other Larkinsons serving in the Mech Corps such as you and Ghanso are the real heroes in the family."

Ves smiled. "I'm just a mech designer."

"A filthy rich one, and now a war hero to boot. I bet our aunts and uncles back at the Larkinson Compound have an entirely different view of you now. The money you rake in for the Larkinson Estate has made many of them greedy, but now that you've earned more valor in battle than most of our mech pilots of this generation, they'll probably rein in demands a bit."

"The family's been out for money, have they?"

"Never in their dreams did they realize that one of us could ever be so successful in starting up a business. The mech industry is notoriously difficult to get into. How did you ever manage to excel as a mech designer?"

"Oh, luck and opportunity, mostly. I'm also quite good at studying if I say so myself."

Ves didn't like to talk too much about himself, so he changed the topic by asking a few questions on her various encounters. As a mech officer of the Planetary Guard, she witnessed plenty of unsettling incidents, from a crazy mech pilot rampaging at a mech academy because he failed a class there once to stopping the usual BLM terrorist attacks.

"The Bentheim Liberation Movement is still keeping that up?" Ves asked with a puzzled frown.

He would have expected them to lay low in anticipation of the upcoming Vesian attack on Bentheim.

"They've grown less in scale, but they're just as destructive." The older cousin replied. "Instead of rampaging around with smuggled or unregistered mechs, they've sent squads of expendable foot soldiers to attack important infrastructure such as logistical centers, factories, strategic fuel depots and more. I don't know where they've come up with so many true believers, because almost none of the people they send out ever make it back alive."

"Ah." This sounded much more in line to a future preparation of an invasion. "However, even if the BLM hasn't deployed their mechs lately doesn't mean they discarded them all, right?"

This put Melinda in a foul mood. "Yeah. I'm not sure what the BLM is up to, but the brass thinks they're planning something enormous. Whatever the separatists are up to, it's enough to send the entire Planetary Guard into high alert."

"How goes the effort in rooting out their hidden mechs?"

"Feh." She snorted. "The investigators are pretty useless. The BLM is always good at hiding their mechs, and this time they've dug even deeper. I'm pretty sure they've got men on the inside to warn them of our raids."

This was the sad reality of trying to stamp out a separatist movement that had been around for centuries.

After some time of chatting and reconnecting, Ves got struck by a sudden impulse.

"Say, Melinda, as a Captain of the Planetary Guard, you do a lot of investigative work, right?"

"I'm a mech pilot, Ves. I mostly stop incidents as they happen. Tracking down the bad guys is a job left to others."

"Even so, you've witnessed plenty of shady stuff, so you must know a thing or two about it, right? Currently, I'm working as a liaison mech designer to the Kadar-Neyvis Group. Have you heard of this mech company?"

She nodded. "It's one of the rising mech companies on Bentheim. They're quite clean and proper compared to some of the other mech companies."

"Well, please help me out on this. There's a chief technician on their payroll who I can't quite figure out."

As Ves described Chief Nyquist to her, the mech captain smirked and crossed her arms.

"I know why he trips your suspicions. You've got good instincts, Ves."

"Please enlighten me. From what I've learned, there's nothing too suspicious about his background."

Melinda raised a finger. "There is one point you've neglected in your investigation. Two points, actually. The first one is his youth. Where was he born? Where was he raised? Which friends did he have, and is he still in touch with them? The second point is that these kinds of records only center around a single individual. What about his family? His record might be clean, but what about his father? What about his mother? Maybe he has a sibling who is also a delinquent."

Ves widened his eyes. "I didn't realize all of that!"

"A single record alone isn't useful enough in catching the bad guys. It's only a starting point where you can jump off into other directions. Right now, I don't know the exact reason why this Nyquist trips you to this extent, but in cases like these it's always worth following up on his background."

Ves looked at Melinda with a pleading expression. "I'd like to ask a favor of you. I'm not as experienced in investigating someone's background as the Planetary Guard. Can you look into his life for me? I'll owe you one."

She frowned. "It's highly improper to investigate a random citizen without cause. If you think I can abuse my authority within the Planetary Guard, you're completely mistaken. I'll have to file a report and receive permission from my superiors before I can embark on an action like that. I can't just tell them that I want to investigate an upstanding citizen of the Republic as a favor."

He forgot himself. Not every institution of the Bright Republic was susceptible to bribes and influence. At the very least, Melinda was completely incorruptible!

"Isn't there anything you can do?"

"Not without cause, Ves. That's the law."

He dropped his request as he saw the futility in attempting to convince Melinda to bend the rules for him. He belatedly realized that a straight-laced

Larkinson like Melinda adhered to her training as a Larkinson to always serve with honesty and integrity!

Ves happened to miss this kind of training, and so had never been indoctrinated in these values.

That was probably a huge oversight on the part of the Larkinsons.

The problem was that Ves influenced so many people these last few years that he began to develop a cynical view of society. He thought he could get anyone to bend or break the rules as long as he paid a sufficiently attractive bribe!

Ves had trouble adjusting to the current situation. After spending so much time with people who believed the ends justified the means or those who tolerated any kind of misdeeds as long as they got a result, interacting with someone who was actually honest messed him up quite a bit!

It was as if he spent so much time with liars, cheats and low lives that he forgot how normal people functioned!

Ves shook his head. He couldn't deal with this problem right now. He decided to change his tack. "Is there anything else you can do to give me a hand?"

Melinda thought for a moment. "I can give you advice and my opinion on some matters, but that's the extent of the help I can give you. As a member of the Planetary Guard, there are many rules that dictate my behavior. While we are charged with ensuring public safety on Bentheim, we also have to respect the individual rights of our citizens."

"I understand." He replied, though he couldn't quite mask his disappointment.

"What's the matter with you, Ves? How come you care so much about this investigation? From what it sounds like, the Mech Corps just wants you far away from the fighting. There's no need to poke around at the KNG. We've

never received any complaints about them or tied them to anything that crosses the line."

How could he open up to Melinda? Besides the inherent insecurity of this venue, he also couldn't let her know about his many sketchy deeds.

"It's hard to describe." He said a little lamely for lack of anything better to say.

"The war has been rather hard on me. I can't tell you anything about what I've been through, but sometimes I wonder how many dangers the galaxy still holds."

"If there's anything you want to lay off your chest, just know that I'm here for you, Ves. That's what family is for. Us Larkinsons always have each other's backs."

He couldn't tell her about the secrets he learned at Aeon Corona VII.

The origin of the MTA and CFA. The hidden influence of the Five Scrolls Compact on humanity's history. The existence of Sigrund and the hybrid AI-alien entity's escape into the wider galaxy.

All of this was just a sample of the many revelations that burdened his mind and that he could never reveal without suffering the consequences.

Of all the secrets he just thought about, the continued uncertainty about Sigrund continued loom over his mind. Keeping to their current accord was tenuous at best. It could never last forever. Either the AI would expose Ves as a Holy Son, or Ves would expose Sigrund as an escaped sentient AI.

The moment one grew strong enough to disregard the consequences of exposure was the time the other one's secrets came out. Ves needed to hurry up and grow stronger as a mech designer and a man of influence if he wanted to survive the inevitable storm that followed!

The worst part about this lingering uncertainty that Ves had no clue when Sigrund grew strong enough to bear the consequences of exposing Ves! It could be a year, a decade or maybe even a century.

However, there was no doubt in his mind that a sentient AI possessed an extremely remarkable capacity for growth. The longer Sigrund accumulated his power, the more frightening he became!

So Ves turned to Melinda and gave her a brittle smile. "I'm doing fine. There's nothing for you to be concerned about."