

# Chapter 137: Lead

## **Spike - Halls Corporation**

“You’re serious? He’s dead?” Spike asked the teary-eyed woman with a frown.

“Yes, we received the message this morning. I’m sorry, but you’ll have to find a sponsor elsewhere.”

“Wait! I don’t want to give up so easily. Can you tell me who informed you of his passing? Was it his family or his company?”

“...His brother did. He called to let us know about Mr. Benedict’s passing and informed us he would be coming by to clean up any of his belongings.”

“When is he coming by?”

“He...Would you leave him be for now? Leave me your contact information and I’ll relay it to him, but for now, let’s give him at least a day to grieve, shall we?”

Spike held himself back from pressing harder for information. He was so close to getting on his target’s trail, but he knew he couldn’t push any further. It was likely an agent that was coming to clean up any remaining traces to prevent being traced.

Still, it was hard for Spike to just give up like that.

“...Apologies, you’re right. I was getting ahead of myself. Give me a moment to send you my contact.”

Spike took out his terminal and took a moment to open it. He discreetly activated a Nye to attach itself to the woman before sending her his info.

“Okay, I’ll take my leave, then. Thank you for your help.”

“No problem.”

Seeing the woman off, Spike calmly made his way back to his car and got changed into a new outfit. He then tracked down the woman he had just parted with and activated his Shade before tailing her into an apartment.

He knew he was dealing with a civilian, so he swiftly made his way to the floor where she was located and began climbing out one of the windows in the hallway. The unit the woman likely didn’t have much in the way of security equipment, which meant he could simply pick the lock on their windows.

He did just that and noticed the woman was going around the house, doing chores. He waited until she had her hands full, carrying laundry before he went over to where she left her handheld terminal.

While Spike wasn't a cy-sec specialist himself, his company had plenty. He quickly opened up a connection to his co-workers, who swiftly breached the device within a few moments. Having attained what he wanted, he retreated out of the building and began browsing through the content they had downloaded.

He walked down the street, bobbing his head as he hummed a tune to avoid having anyone approach him.

Going through the contact details and text history, found the message from one of the lady's friends relaying the news of their sponsor's death. He tried to find any contact details for the sponsor but failed, as the woman had never been in direct contact with them.

However, Spike did find a clue as to where the so-called 'brother' of Mr. Benedict was headed to collect the deceased's belongings.

'Mr. Benedict's brother will be coming by to pick up his belongings. I already collected everything and threw it over to Arthur's place. Can you talk to him later and see what kind of person this brother is? We'll need a new sponsor...' Spike reread the message one more time before sending it over to his superior, the head of the intel department.

He hadn't even made it back to his car when the call came in from his boss.

"I ran the name 'Arthur' into the ECPD database for the people around your area, and we've got a match. That text was sent not long ago. Hurry over to see if you can catch this 'brother'."

Spike didn't need to be told twice and quickly made his way over. He didn't need to infiltrate the building or anything this time, and simply dropped a few Nyes for surveillance before waiting in his car.

As his luck would have it, he didn't have to wait long before he witnessed a large cyborg man coming out of the building with a briefcase, accompanied by a middle-aged man.

"Thank you so much for preparing all of my brother's stuff so quickly. I appreciate it."

"No, no. No need for thanks. Your brother had done a lot for us in our time of need. This is the least we can do. Please feel free to come visit us anytime."

The large man nodded and said his goodbyes before throwing the stuff in his hands into a car parked out front. Spike quickly started up his car and began following him.

He wasted no time in relaying the license plate of the vehicle back to his company and called for reinforcements.

The car traveled at speeds just within the legal limit, which was painfully slow in Elevate City's standard, as people rarely followed the rules. Many felt like they needed to break a few traffic rules to snub the people in charge in a futile gesture of resistance against the corporate overlords.

*At least this means there's more time for my calvary to come in.*

Spike soon followed the man out onto the main street. To his surprise, the cyborg turned into the first plaza they came across and got out of the car. Spike tried to continue driving forward, looking to loop back instead of following him straight into the parking lot, but what he didn't expect was the cyborg staring directly in his way as he drove by.

Before he could notify his allies that his cover was likely blown, the cyborg pointed a hand at him, and his wrist suddenly snapped out of the way to reveal a thick barrel. A moment later, the cyborg fired his hand cannon directly at Spike.

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I held out a terminal as I circled a prototype power armor that was currently only half-built. It was much more complicated to design one from scratch than I had thought.

While it was easy to connect different modules together to put together a power armor as I had done, designing each module itself was an entirely different story.

It was likely this design doctrine was established with the customization of the power armor in mind so that it could easily adapt to different battlefield environments. I had benefited from this when I was putting together my makeshift power armor using all the parts from other corporations, but now I couldn't take that shortcut.

Making use of the modules of others meant they knew everything about it, and that was not acceptable when dealing with a trump card like the power armor. I was sure the other corporation constantly updated theirs anyway, so it was inevitable that I had to learn how to craft each module from scratch if I wanted it to stay up-to-date. Otherwise, they would've never agreed to share their power armor with me.

The only part I would be outsourcing is the mini-nuclear reactor the power armors used. They were sold by SocialCorp and weren't something I had the knowledge, time, or resources to create. At least they had several models to choose from, and it was one of the first things I had to decide on for my design.

Based on that selection, I knew how much power I was working with, so I could account for what other parts I could incorporate.

Right now, I have finished the parts responsible for all our signature tech, the active camouflage of our Shades, the active scans from our Argus, our Nyes, and silenced the footsteps of the

power armor. While it was nice, it was only the foundation, and we wanted some more oomph in our trump card.

The role of a power armor was that of an urban tank. If it only excelled at stealth ambushes, then it wouldn't make much sense. As a tank, I definitely wanted to up its defenses, but that would increase the weight. The heavier it was, the less mobile it was, making its stealth capabilities less valuable.

Faced with this dilemma, I looked back at the piece of tech I had salvaged from an old enemy.

Gazing upon the device that was only the size of a fist, I couldn't help but reminisce back to the fight I had against QuickLinks Logistics. I could still clearly remember the surprise I felt when that bodyguard stopped our rounds with a shimmering energy shield with a blue tint.

Thankfully, it wasn't perfect, and the shockwaves from several explosive rounds were able to disorient him and take down his defenses. However, if that bodyguard had also been equipped with a power armor, it may have turned out entirely differently.

I shuddered at that thought, but also compelled myself to consider adding it to my creation.

The technology behind it was too sophisticated for me when I tried to decipher it previously, and I doubt much has changed since then. I would probably have to level up physics and some other specialized branch of science to be able to understand it.

I opened my status screen and took a look at the long list of possibilities.

Status	
Level:	24
EXP:	1730/2400
Musculoskeletal:	211
Neural Reflex:	65
Visuomotor Coordination:	87
Endurance:	59
Sensory Perception:	127
Upgrade Points:	0
Upgrades:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Stealth +7</li><li>● Hacking +5</li><li>● Cybernetic Engineering +10</li></ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Stealth Technology +10</li> <li>● Software Engineering +10</li> <li>● Electrical Engineering +10</li> </ul>
Enhancements:	SAID: Zenitech Sebastien v2 Bio-Coprocessor: SocialCorp Lightning II Optics: Mirage Tech Clear-Sights mk.12 Cyberarm (Left): Nova Tech Heracle Mk. 3 Cyberarm (Right): Nova Tech Heracle Mk. 3 Auditory: SocialCorp Echo IV Vocal: SocialCorp Orator III Cardiovascular: BioGen Lifepump 5 Sensory: Halls Corp Argus Elite Custom Additional Processing: Halls Corp Custom ST Miscellaneous: Halls Corp HSU Custom Shade

I found a choice labeled Energy Defensive Systems, which was likely the one most relevant to the device before me, but I wasn't sure if I wanted to get sidetracked and spend my precious points on an entirely new subject.

I still needed more points in software engineering to perfect my AI, so that it was less likely for others to detect it. It would be folly to chase after every new tech I came across.

An alternative was to hire or train specialists like normal corporations did, but that would take time and luck. I don't think there would be any scientist on the market who just happened to have knowledge of the tech that I needed, as it was likely proprietary to some high-level corporation.

The last option I had thought of was to completely replicate the energy shield generator before me. I wouldn't try to understand it at all and copy it as best I can. It would likely take quite a few trials and errors, but it was also the option that was the most likely to succeed. And if I could get the AI up online to assist me with it, it may be possible to get done in the short term.

I sighed at the thought that there was yet another project that could be sped up if I finished the AI.

*I really need to hurry up, level up, and focus on finishing the AI first. If only all this bullshit with the sabotage can just go away...*

As if the world had read my mind, a timely call abruptly came in.

"Hello, Claire? Got something for me?"

"Yes. I have good news and bad news. Which one did you want first?"

"We really have to go through this routine, huh?" I sighed and shook my head. "Give me the bad one first, then."

“The agent we sent out to investigate Derek’s ‘benefactor’ discovered that he was dead. We then found someone that should be related to him, but he got away after blowing up our agent’s car.”

“So they cleaned up after themselves...Have you informed our employee’s family?”

“Oh yes, but he’s not dead. Injured, but otherwise fine and should make a full recovery in a few weeks.”

I did a fist pump as I celebrated the fact my employee had survived, and we wouldn’t have to pay out the death benefits.

“Was that the good news?”

“Heh, no. The good news is much better than that. I just received word from Fitel that he has completed his investigation and he believes he’s fairly sure who the mysterious mastermind behind all this crap is. I’m forwarding the file he sent me now.”

*Finally.*