

Chapter 186: Return

I wasn't able to return to Elevate City immediately. Ceres Station was quite far from Earth, even with the so-called NPC's state-of-the-art spacecraft.

Communication was iffy as well. The distance made the transmission unstable. Normally, they would use a house-sized communication device to power through that, but even then, Captain Diaz requested we didn't use it unless it was urgent.

Broadcasting signals were a good way to get detected. It may even allow any potential foes to set up an ambush on us. That was why I obediently stayed in my quarters during the past few days of traveling. Well, with some company, of course.

"Pass me the plasma welder," I called out to my employee beside me.

"...Andrew, you don't have to listen to everything he says. You guys have been at it for over six hours. This guy wrote into your contract itself that you're entitled to a break every four hours," the annoying cyborg chimed in from the sideline.

"I...it's fine, sir. There isn't much to do here anyway."

"Yeah, stop nagging. Once we get back, I won't have any spare time left. That's why I have to use my time efficiently now or else your power armors will never get upgraded."

"..."

I ignored his grumblings and got back to work.

Standing inside the quarters I was assigned was our company's power armor. Throughout my time during captivity and from this ship I was on, I had made many observations on the various advanced power armors. Powered by all the data I pulled from Nova Tech's database, I had a lot of ideas I wanted to try out. My foundational knowledge had increased, and coupled with the generous tools the captain allowed me to access, I felt at home in my makeshift workshop.

At the apex, power armors were no longer treated as mobile urban tanks. The standard wasn't the clumsy units I was used to, but a super fast force of scientific marvels. As they were operated by big companies, they also had the capacity to employ multiple models. Some specialized for speed and flanking maneuvers, while some for soaking up damage.

This wasn't something I had the leeway to do. Managing one model of power armor already kept us at capacity. I would have to wait until I expanded my team before thinking about that.

That was why I focused on improving what we had. Seeing the energy shields in action in conjunction with the power armor designed with it gave me a lot of inspiration. I previously skimmed out on the armor for speed, and that was in the right direction. However, what I

should've focused on was to redirect a bigger portion of the freed-up mass for mechanical components that increased the strength and speed at which it moved.

That was how the frontline power armor I saw was set up. They allowed powerful bursts of speed. Their smaller counterpart was even more extreme, but they weren't suitable for being our company's lone model of power armor. In a way, those were just a beefed-up version of combat suits.

"Thorne," I called out while continuing to work. "You said you witnessed the fighting from start to finish. Anything you noticed?"

"They're...just fast. Not fast enough that I'm helpless, but it'll be trouble if I face multiple targets at that speed."

"Hmm, I plan on working on the set of cybernetics before this incident. I'll try to focus on speed, but if you're saying that, maybe I'll look to work on a bio-coprocessor as well. Luckily, I recently made some headways in that direction."

Thank you Nova Tech.

"Okay...You do you."

I finished up the modifications and began running a diagnostic test. Once I got that finished up, I could have Thorne or Andrew test it out on the training grounds on the ship. The data of Nova Tech's premier cyberarms really helped in implementing more powerful mechanical parts.

While I waited, I examined some of the other data I pilfered. With the topic of cybernetics brought up, I naturally opened up the file regarding Nova Tech's other products. There was a lot to learn more about a market leader. Their architectural philosophy wasn't laid out in words, but you could tell a lot from just inspecting the designs.

I gained a lot of valuable knowledge from it. My cybernetic knowledge worked best when accompanied by other disciplines, to create an implant that both excelled in its function and melded well with the human body. It was these various disciples of knowledge I was after.

My work continued and only stopped when Thorne physically pulled me away from it. We then had dinner and visited Polina and the rest of the captives before going to bed. Then we would rinse and repeat on the next few days.

On the sixth day of travel, we finally arrived at Aegis.

"Our shuttle will take you onto Aegis proper. This will be goodbye for us," Captain Diaz declared as she offered her hand.

I nodded and shook her hand.

"Thanks a lot, captain. I owe you."

“We just did as ordered. Thank our employer instead.”

The crewmates didn't really interact with us, so after saying our goodbyes to the captain, we soon departed onto the shuttle they provided.

We landed within a private berth on Aegis. We didn't immediately head out as we waited for the shuttle to make a few round trips. That was because they had to offload the former test subjects as well.

I watched as they stretched their bodies with subtle smiles on their faces. They had been held captive for who knows how long, but they now regained their freedom. Well, it wasn't all sunshine and rainbows. Many of them would struggle to afford the cost of the ticket back down to the planet.

With all my upcoming plans, even I balked at the idea of forking over a five-digit amount for each one of them, as they numbered almost fifty. I heard some of them still had family, so maybe they could work things out. Otherwise, they would have to take odd jobs here and save up.

The people who didn't have anyone to return to could just live in Aegis, but those who did would have a bumpy patch ahead of them.

“Well...This is where we'll have to part ways. If any of you have some skills and are looking to work for a corporation, you can consider checking my Halls Corporation out.”

“It's okay. You've done enough for us.” Polina stepped forth and gave me a hug. “We'll figure our way back down ourselves. I'll come find you once I've arrived.”

I personally wanted to help out Polina and have made an offer to but she refused. Even with a daughter waiting for her, she didn't want to leave her companions and received special treatment. I could only respect her wishes.

“...Here. This is my company's website. There are some open positions we're looking to fill, and I'll give them a heads up about you guys.”

Just because we couldn't help them the entire way didn't mean we didn't do anything at all. We at least supplied each of them with enough credits for their next month and a simple handheld terminal.

Once we made sure they were okay, we headed straight for the spaceport. With pre-ordered tickets, we found no trouble and boarded the ride that would take us home.

As we headed back down to the planetside, I couldn't help but smile. I had prepared myself to be gone a lot longer than a few months. It was a welcome fact that it wasn't years, but a new sense of urgency welled up inside of me as I laid eyes on Elevate City.

Down in the megacity, there were numerous corporations lurking within. There were still numerous companies that rivaled Nova Tech in power, and any one of them could overpower my current company.

I had enough of roleplaying the captive. I needed to grow, prepare, and adapt. I needed contingency plans upon contingency plans in place.

I swear I won't get captured so helplessly again.

"Surprise and welcome back, boss!" a large entourage of my employees yelled out upon arriving at my company grounds—or so I imagined.

Differing from reality, I quietly pulled up into our parking garage. Andrew's teammates, Brian and Mark, had come to pick us up. Our entire drive back was filled with them asking Andrew about his mission.

I was the one who told them to act casually, so I couldn't complain when I wasn't the center of attention. I had thought my return would be a lot bigger deal for some reason, but I was wrong.

Things moved along in the Halls Corporation headquarters as normal, with no one batting an eye at my appearance. Well, that wasn't accurate. Some did look my way and whisper to their peers. I could access the company software to eavesdrop, but that was too petty.

"You guys managed to keep the reason for my disappearance that well under wraps, even after so long?" I whispered over to Thorne.

He grinned.

"Everyone knows your predisposition to hole yourself up every so often. It just so happens it lasted longer this time, but nothing different from the usual."

"..."

At the curious gazes of my employees, I made my way to the top floor where our offices were. I headed straight to my room, only to find that Claire sitting in my chair instead of her own. I walked straight through the glass doors and waved at her.

"Hey, as promised, I'm back."

She glanced up from the terminal for a moment before looking back down.

“Give me one second.”

While she was focused on the terminal, I spotted several familiar faces arriving from behind me. Our head of intelligence, Lucy, and our cyber-sec duo, Leo and Lana, were all headed our way.

Claire picked this opportune moment to speak.

“Everyone was worried, you know? We all had to work extra hard to keep this ship together. I just want you to know that.”

“Yes...I’ve placed a huge burden on you guys.”

“...” Claire stood up and came to my side to welcome the incoming visitors. However, she suddenly held onto my arm and buried her face in my shoulder. “Those were the words I had to say as the COO of this company. Now these are my own words. I’m glad you’re back, you idiot! Don’t you ever pull off a stunt like that again!”

“I—”

“Be quiet. I don’t need to hear your excuses.”

Her voice choked. I could feel my shoulder growing damp. I quickly commanded the glass partition to turn opaque on the other side as Claire began to rant about all the difficulties she had to deal with in my absence.

I saw our visitors take the hint and converse with Thorne outside the room while they waited.

“...were so uncertain with every decision we made. What I’m trying to say...is I’m glad you’re back, I guess.”

Whatever I could see, Claire could too. She quickly recollected herself, brushing away her tears. Her eyes weren’t red or anything thanks to her optics. We quickly let our companions in.

They all walked in quietly without a word until the door was closed and the employees outside could no longer peek in.

Instantly, several hands landed on my shoulders and back.

“You made it back. I knew you could do it,” Leo said with a reassuring smile.

Lana nodded in agreement before continuing.

“Can’t believe the huge mess you got yourself into. Still, I’m glad things turned out all right.”

The two of them seemed happy enough, but that couldn’t be said for our intel director.

“Umm, sir. I would like to apologize. I should’ve caught wind of something and given you more warning.”

“Nonsense. The people we were dealing with weren’t ordinary, to say the least. It’s not your fault. With that said, I do plan on expanding your department, so just do better next time.”

“...You’re keeping me in my position?”

“Yes. I trust you to do a good job.”

“I will!” Energy returned to Lucy’s voice as she nodded with power. “I’ll do my best and more.”

“Ahem,” Claire cleared her throat. “Enough with all the work and gloomy talk. I think it’s time for us to celebrate! Let’s head downstairs and party it up!”

She was so lively she was compared to a moment ago. It was a change I welcomed. It was also upon seeing how relieved she looked that I decided to swallow all the words I had down. It just wasn’t the time to talk business. It could wait a day.

There was no mistake that there was a lot to do. We had to expand our business, likely in the software market, once our foundation was stable. In the short term, create various hidden bases to protect ourselves. Train personnel. Create new cybernetics. Get caught up with everything I’ve missed, and connect with all our allies and friends.

Like my guardian angel, or otherwise known as NPC, had said, time was ticking. It was safer for us to grow rapidly. I could no longer stay low and take things slowly. It was time to expand, and as fast as I could, too.