

Chapter 170: Brainstorm

Thorne - Halls Corporation

“We have submitted your request for an appointment, sir. There is nothing else we can do for today but wait,” the receptionist politely replied.

She didn't bat an eye to the cyborg before her, who was obviously getting agitated.

“Are you sure? I believe if you let Mr. Adiar know that I'm from the Halls Corporation, he may be willing to meet us today.”

“Sir, I've already done all I can. We will contact you should the meeting request be accepted. In the meantime, please return.”

With those words, the receptionist finally directed a sharp look at Thorne, conveying the end of our patience. Thorne took one quick look around the place and sighed.

Despite the interior lobby looking clean and pristine, Thorne didn't fail to notice all the defensive emplacements ready to burst out of their hidden compartment the moment he showed any hostile action. Not even his cyborg body could survive under such heavy fire for more than a split second.

“Very well. Thank you for your time.”

Thorne soon exited the compound, passing through the colossal white walls that protected it, and reunited with his friends. They were still in the two taxis, waiting just outside AeroDynamic's headquarters.

“Judging from your face, I assume it didn't work out in your favor,” Lana said as she shook her head. “Let's go. No more time to waste, then.”

Thorne wordlessly nodded and boarded the vehicle and their party resumed their journey, cutting across the chaotic traffic of Ganymede Station. While the area around the corporate compound was normal, as soon as they left its area of influence, all traffic laws were suddenly thrown out the window.

People zipped by, ignoring the traffic signals, with cars weaving in and out of traffic. The only saving grace was that there weren't that many vehicles. It might be owing to the low economic conditions of the average resident here.

The Halls Corporation entourage soon made it to their destination after cutting across the smog-polluted air, arriving before a plain-looking hostel. It had a yellow neon sign depicting its name, Break Time Hostel.

The group only needed a moment to scrutinize the five-story building that was made of the same gunmetal grey material as the neighboring structures.

As they got out of the car, the people on the streets all directed their gaze toward Thorne's group. They had a hungry look and a defiant glint in their eyes.

Even with their power armor hidden under a holographic guise it projected, Thorne could feel everyone sizing them up.

"Let's go."

Following Thorne's lead, the group quickly entered the hostel the taxi drivers had recommended.

"Are you sure we can trust those guys about this place?" Andrew muttered.

"Should be if they are allowed to access the area around the spaceport," Thorne replied.

"...Shouldn't they just use auto-drive taxis instead?"

"This city doesn't seem like the peaceful type of place. The cost of replacing an auto-drive taxi is much higher than a basic car and hiring the next Joe off the street...Or so Rollo used to say whenever we went to fast-food places and convenience stores."

Their group of five was soon able to check into their rooms, and they swiftly reconvened in Thorne's room to discuss their next step.

"So what's your glorious plan now that walking up to the front door didn't work?" Lana chided as soon as they got settled. "In the first place, why don't you come clean with our objective? You said you would reveal it once we arrived, didn't you?"

Thorne took a moment to glance around and deployed several scans on his Argus before replying.

"Our target is called Titus Adiar, the majority shareholder of AeroDynamic."

"What? Majority shareholder? You mean like the biggest owner of that damn corporation? And you thought you could just stroll in there and speak with him just now?"

"Yes...He's acquainted with Rollo."

"...I'm not going to dig into how that happened, but you're only trying to talk to him, right?"

"Yes...but if it doesn't work out, our minimum requirement is to leave a message he'll see. Though I'd rather talk with him."

“Don’t give me that look.” Lana sighed. “I can’t hack into his calls or anything. The entire compound of an A-Class corporation is way out of my league. They probably have trained hundreds of cyber security experts who are at least on par with me.”

“I know it’s foolish to do anything on their home turf. I was planning to do some research about this place first. Maybe there’s a restaurant or somewhere he often visits?”

The group descended into silence as they each had their own thoughts. However, they all knew who was in charge, so after a moment of hesitation, they all complied. They then began sharing various methods they could go about to gather info.

“In a place like this...The workers probably have their own network. Maybe several gangs and whatnot as well,” Andrew muttered.

“Let’s split into teams and get started, then.”

It’s been over a week since I snuck out to Ceres Station.

My life returned to a mundane routine where I ate, worked, and slept. However, with my access to their systems still undetected, I occasionally scouted around for valuable information. Unfortunately, they had good security practices in place and they only kept the data for ongoing projects on the network. I believe they kept all their completed work and sensitive information on a different network.

For me, the safest network would be one that was completely offline, so it wouldn’t be surprising if others thought the same.

My life had gotten boring, working on the same model of cyberarm every day, which was why I was super happy to hear that the project would be finishing up today.

“After the latest meeting among our executives, they believe our Project NVP 1389-THN is ready to move on to production,” Cora explained to her assistants and me. “That is why we will be attending a brainstorming session with the rest of lab three to discuss the next project.”

One of the younger women beside me raised her hands.

“Ma’am, I believe there is still some room for improvement. The issue with the heat tolerance we discussed last week is still unchanged.”

“...Cassie, you should know that when the executives have made a decision, it is no longer up for discussion.”

“But—”

Cora raised her hand to silence the young woman.

“They have read our daily reports and have deemed it is no longer cost-efficient to continue pursuing a single-digit percentage of incremental improvements. Nova Tech is a business first and foremost, and finances should be taken into consideration as well.”

The entire room suddenly seemed to be admonishing the young woman with their gaze.

She must be new if she's unwittingly drawing this kind of attention to herself...

“So, then.” I cleared my throat. “Should we be heading back to the main lab to meet with the other teams?”

“In a moment. I have one more important announcement.” Cora took a pregnant pause and glanced around the room. “After examining all your hard work throughout our latest project, Head Researcher Chen has approved several promotions among our ranks. First up, Alex, Candice, Kathryn, Megan. You will be promoted to Research Assistant Class IV. Next, Theo will be promoted to Class III. And finally, Rollo, your promotion to Junior Researcher has been approved. Congratulations to all of you.”

Everyone in the room clapped and cheered, even though some of them didn't mean it. I waited for it to die down before raising my hand to ask a question.

“Cora, does this mean I am of the same rank as you now?”

“No, I have also been promoted and am now an Associate Researcher. You will still be working under me, but several new assistants should be assigned to you shortly.”

After explaining some more mundane details about my new position, our group finally got on our way to the main lab.

While walking there, I couldn't help but shake my head at the blatant way Nova Tech was having Cora watch over me. Junior Researchers should usually be leading their own team to help with the testing of their assigned part of the project, but I was being kept on a leash.

They were still cautious of me despite thinking I wouldn't escape their grasp, so I guess there were still some people in the company who knew there was a possibility I would be rescued. This made me more worried about my future escape, as it would mean they would still be directing resources to defend me.

However, if they agreed to promote me at all, it meant on the other side of the coin, some supported assimilating me into their company entirely. Otherwise, it would be foolish to give me access to their internal database.

All this politicking that may or may not be happening in the background made me more motivated to move up the ranks, so I could have more leeway and influence. I'm sure being able to access information like their base layout could provide tremendous value to my future rescuers.

Soon we arrived in the main lab area, where dozens of chairs were set up in the open space. The seats were already more than half filled, so we got seated as well. Fifteen minutes later, all the seats were filled and an old woman walked up to the forefront.

“Good day, everyone. As I’m sure you’ve heard, Project NVP 1389-THN has been deemed complete. I want to take a moment to commend everyone for their hard work.” The woman began clapping and the rest quickly followed. “Now then, this also means we will be embarking on a new, exciting journey. As we have done before, we will be discussing ideas regarding a new project. I won’t waste any more time. Everyone, please log into the main hub.”

The eyes of the surrounding people swiftly began to glow as they dove into their optics. A brief moment later, I received a message from Cora with some instructions.

Apparently, this particular Senior Researcher in charge of lab three liked to use a virtual discussion room whenever they brainstormed new projects. Everyone would be incognito and could speak their mind freely without repercussion.

The skeptic in me believed this was just a way for the Senior Researcher to claim the ideas of her subordinates for herself, and also keep her people under her, without possibly to promote over her.

Still, it didn’t diminish the effectiveness of being able to share ideas openly, so I began considering taking a similar approach for my company as well.

I logged in as instructed and kept quiet as a fierce debate was taking place between the researchers.

In the meantime, I began requesting access to Nova Tech’s knowledge base with my new permissions as a Junior Researcher. It was finally time for me to plunder the fruits of their research.

I made sure the terminal implant I had in me was ready to record everything. Even the basic information was important to help me build up my foundation. I hungered for knowledge from various disciplines of science that I could all eventually turn into cassettes.

Just when I managed to download a dozen different topics into my internal terminal, a sentence in the ongoing group chat drew my attention.

If we’re doing a reflex mod, we should be doing the experiments ourselves. It should be doable to have them send us a few hundred subjects every week, right?

The budget for that will explode!

*But you saw the market research reports. There’s a gap in the bio-coprocessor market right now. SocialCorp is showing no signs of releasing a new product and old guards in the market

like Mirage Tech and Neuro Technica are focused on different markets. It's our chance to grab some market shares.*

Who is this guy? Someone get him a business analyst position instead of a researcher.

As the text chat flooded with responses, Rollo fell deep into his own thoughts.

Human experimentation...but with Nova Tech. I wonder how they source their subjects...because I don't think I could work with a peace of mind if they used kidnapped innocent civilians as test subjects.