

Chapter 147: Enemies to Allies

“What do you think if we split the components into smaller models, but have several of them linked? It would increase redundancy and allow us to alter the exterior like this for a more stable structure.” I asked the man beside me.

Luford, the acting CEO of Sensorial Corp, had paid my workshop a visit to explore possibilities of cooperation. Our talks quickly descended into a group design session as we looked at gaps in the market and ways we could address them.

“That...isn't commonly used outside of cybernetic models. The costs and production difficulty increase quite a bit when we do it that way. The overall power reduces too—”

“That's true when you compare them in tip-top condition, but we have to account for when the device is damaged. Sensors are the eyes on the battlefield and I have no doubt many combatants go for the eyes first if they can.”

Our discussions were fruitful, and we managed to pave the groundwork for the birth of another product. However, I mainly acted as the consultant and helped steer the direction. Then, Luford would be the one doing the optimization and testing, as his company was better equipped for it.

They had a sizable R&D department that could even handle up to four projects at a time. So it was quite beneficial for me to offload the majority of the tedious work to them in exchange for sharing the profits.

It would allow us to quickly push out several products. No longer would our company suffer from a small product catalog and be prone to the slightest of market disruptions.

After seeing off Luford, I returned to working on my solo projects in peace, or so I thought until an alarm reminded me of my next meeting.

Thankfully, it took place virtually, as the other party wasn't in Elevate City at the moment.

“Joey, how have you been?”

“Quite good, actually. I have recently successfully partnered up with the Stellzen Group, a B-Class corporation in the hospitality industry. They will be able to help me expand my restaurants off-planet.”

“Oh, how did you manage to do that?” I didn't bother to hide my furrowed eyebrows.

“Don't worry, Rollo. I didn't decide to become a vassal to another corporation. I simply gave them some of my company's preferred shares.”

“I see...”

I did recall this coming up when I did my research back in the early days of forming my company.

There were no stock markets in this world in the traditional sense that I was familiar with, as trust was quite scarce here. It didn't help there wasn't a monolithic organization that could enforce the rules as well.

Instead, preferred shares were traded between corporations. They were shares that had no voting power over the company and only gave dividends. While there were still areas that could be exploited, preferred shares were still popular when interests aligned between parties.

"How about you, Rollo? I heard you've recovered from that hiccup of yours."

"Thankfully, yes. Now I can focus on other... pursuits."

"Anything specific in mind?"

I definitely wasn't going to share any of my confidential projects, but there was one thing that had been on my mind recently.

"Actually, I was thinking of starting up a dessert chain, specializing in milkshakes. That should be in your domain. What do you think?"

"Milkshakes...I don't have too much market research data on that. I wouldn't advise it if you're looking for profits. The drink and dessert industries are quite...volatile. They depend heavily on ever-changing trends too much. And trends...just look at the alcohol industry and you'll know. They used to be a big market, but then SocialCorp introduced their Cloudpuff and flipped the entire alcohol industry upside down."

The vague image of the small box I've seen at some corpo parties came to mind. It was like hookah from my previous world, but one inhaled it instead of smoking it. It was apparently a fad among upper-class corpos and a healthy alternative compared to the other vices.

Not sure why they would suddenly care about their liver when they can just easily get a replacement, though.

"Well, it's more of a hobby project. I don't plan on making a fortune from it."

What I left unsaid was that it could aid our intelligence department. With our catalog expansion on the horizon, it didn't mean we could let up on counter-intelligence. The problem with setting up a network was that it wasn't cheap or easy to do. Having more stores in various cities would be useful as a base of operation.

"While I likely will go with opening a chain in several cities, do you think there is potential for opening a separate brand catering to the upper class?"

“Hmm...I would have to say no. Not unless you have connections in that circle to affect the trends.”

“...I see.”

Well, it was just a thought, anyway.

“Maybe you should attend more social events with other executives. You’ll benefit a lot from keeping up on the latest fads and gossip.” Joey advised with a thoughtful look.

“...Sure.”

“However, it may not be so easy to be invited to the gatherings among more influential companies until your company reaches at least C-Class.”

“...”

Great, that’s helpful...

Luford Perez - Sensorial Corporation

Inside one of the R&D labs within Sensorial’s headquarters, Luford was discussing one of his new projects with his employees.

“Sir, for the nautical sensor, how about we replace our modules here and—”

Before the researcher could finish, someone abruptly entered the lab. The two instantly relaxed when they recognized the newcomer as Luford’s new assistant.

“Sir! It’s time for you to move on to team three’s lab if you want to be on schedule.”

Luford grimaced at the reminder. Ever since he had taken control of the company from his brother, Harold, he had become more busy than he ever wanted.

“Very well. I’ll have to leave here for today. You continue in the direction you think is best, and we will review it together in the next few days when I come around again.”

“...Yes, sir.”

As soon as Luford closed the lab doors behind him, he didn’t hesitate to let out an exaggerated sigh. However, his assistant was there and didn’t even give him the short moment of respite he needed.

“Sir, please do not show any exhaustion in public. As our acting CEO, it will demotivate the employees if they see you like this.”

Luford wordlessly picked up the pace as he navigated to the adjacent research lab. The only thoughts in his mind were how he could delegate more of his tasks away and cursing at his supposed 'ally' who threw all the new work on his plate.

If only I had a month—no two weeks to prepare for this...

The day after I had finalized our next projects with Sensorial Corp, I took the next flight to NLA.

"Rollo and Thorne. Welcome back again." Vin greeted as he leaned on the hood of his ICE vehicle.

"Yeah. What can I say? I like the wasteland?"

Both he and Thorne shrugged before we got on our way. A small convoy surrounded Vin's junk vehicle as we made our way into town. I was super thankful for it because it meant there weren't any other cars for Vin to weave through during our ride. His driving was too exciting for my tastes, despite how clean he claimed his record to be.

"So how is our logistic division doing?" I asked.

"Good enough. You'll have to ask the finance guys if you want the details."

"Well, I plan on starting a new business that will encompass your jurisdiction as well. So I guess I will talk to them."

"...Yeah, it's a good idea to check on our cash flow first. We just recently promoted to an F-Class corp, after all."

"Should be fine. We were planning to jump straight to E-Class before."

"Wouldn't this delay it even more then?"

"I had a change of heart. This latest incident has warned me that we are too vulnerable because we are reliant on so few financial pillars. I don't want to get ahead of myself and then end up being unable to pay the annual fees to the consortium. We can afford to build up a foundation first."

"Slow and steady wins the race, or that's what my pops always used to say."

"It's also the reason I am partnering with Sensorial to swiftly push out more products."

"...Go on."

“Our businesses need allies. Not just the ones like the alliance, but ones that share economic interests with us. When we tie in other corporations, our enemies think twice about messing with our joint ventures lest they provoke more enemies.”

“Understood. That’s for you guys to figure out. The politicking isn’t my thing.”

We soon arrived at our regional headquarters for a short while before we headed straight for the wasteland outpost.

The reason for my rush wasn’t because something urgent came up in the wasteland, but for my system. On the ride out, I pulled up my status screen.

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|--------------------------|--|
| Status | |
| Level: | 24 |
| EXP: | 2190/2400 |
| Musculoskeletal: | 211 |
| Neural Reflex: | 65 |
| Visuomotor Coordination: | 87 |
| Endurance: | 59 |
| Sensory Perception: | 127 |
| Upgrade Points: | 0 |
| Upgrades: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Stealth +7 ● Hacking +5 ● Cybernetic Engineering +10 ● Stealth Technology +10 ● Software Engineering +10 ● Electrical Engineering +10 |
| 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 was very close to the next vital level that I needed before completing the AI project.

All the work I've been doing on it made me realize all the amazing things I could do with a functional AI. I stared at my screen depicting all my cybernetics and took in the realization it was possible to create all my cybernetics in-house if I had an AI who could help me speed up my projects.

It was a big undertaking that I didn't believe I had the capacity to do before, but once I unlocked the sleep learning cassettes, I could shore up any knowledge I needed when working on future projects.

I even thought up a new framework that had always eluded me when I first received all my cybernetic knowledge. The reason Thorne's cyborg body was special was how many organic parts he retained for normal human functions. His cybernetics parts were designed with numerous safeguards to prevent unsafe levels of hazardous materials from affecting his body. It was like how our Argus was superior because it allowed for high-powered scans without frying the internals of its users.

My knowledge allowed me to do this while keeping the synergistic advantages of cyberware.

There was an enormous difference between someone with a cyberarm and one with both cybernetic arms and a spine. In the former scenario, the cybernetic had to be fine-tuned to prevent it from overexerting itself and hurting the other parts of the body.

The human body moved together, and while cyberware designed tried to account for the balance and support as much as possible, they had to resort to a one-size-fits-all solution.

Thorne's case wasn't common, as full body replacement was decidedly more popular simply due to ease of implementation, and how much more synergistic the effect was. Drawing from this conclusion, I realized if I designed a complete set of cybernetics while taking into account how each piece worked together, I could create an interconnected system without any of those limiters, which would make it much more effective than a group of random parts.

It would bring me and my people closer to the power of a cyborg without resorting to full-body replacement. It also brought our actual full-body replacement users up to another level.

The slim but powerful cyborgs from Ferrumus Corp came to mind. I could finally see the path toward attaining comparable power.