

Chapter 172: Orchestrating

Thorne - Halls Corporation

Just as Lana shook on the deal she forged with the Grindhouse Rebels, gunshots suddenly rang out from outside.

Thorne swiftly pulled up the feed of the Nyes he had waiting around the area while Lana stayed close to her cyborg bodyguard. She had her eyes on the representative from Grindhouse Rebels the entire time and found he was equally surprised, which was the only reason she was so calm.

“Were you guys expecting trouble?”

“What?” The man looked back, bemused for a brief moment before recollecting himself. “Of course not. It must be those Axle Heads. Damn it, I thought we had a peace thing going on that was profitable for both sides.”

The fighting outside only intensified as everyone in the room contacted various parties about the new development.

Thorne and Lana were alone in an unfamiliar territory while fighting had broken out, so it was natural they called for reinforcements. However, Thorne didn't find it urgent at all. He could see what was going on outside and confidently believed he was more than enough to handle it. He only called for backup as insurance as Lana was with him.

Meanwhile, the man from the Grindhouse Rebels wasn't as relaxed. He was frantically messaging various members of his gang. Beads of sweat formed on his forehead as he got more nervous by the second.

Seeing this, Lana leaned over and whispered into Thorne's ear.

“Want to help them so they're in our debt? I'm sure it'll motivate them to work a lot faster for us.”

“Hmm...those guys don't look like they'll be trouble for us. Sure.”

“What? That's it? I know I was the one who asked, but you're just going to agree to go into the thick of fighting just like that?”

“Yeah,” Thorne nodded. “I see what I'm up against. To be honest, they're not a threat, especially with the power armor underneath this projection. Plus, getting into unnecessary fights is a daily occurrence when you roll with Rollo.”

“...I knew you guys headed out a lot, but I thought it was for intel gathering or something. Does Rollo seriously just fight random harvesters for fun?”

“Hmm...He says it's important to him in some way, so maybe? It might be his way of gaining inspiration because every time he's about to come up with a new invention, he goes hunting harvesters the night before.”

A loud explosion rang out downstairs, interrupting the duo's conversation. They nodded at each other before Lana turned to the frantic gang member.

“Hey you, whatever your name is.”

“It's Marvin...”

“Okay, Marvin. Tell us the truth. You guys are in disorder out there, right?”

“...It may just be my allies are busy with the fighting. We shouldn't lose too badly to those Axle Heads, even if we got caught off guard.”

“Oh, then I guess you don't need our help, then?”

“...We would appreciate it if you did help. We like to keep casualties low for these conflicts.”

“We can do that, but not for free. You'll have to tell us about this feud you're having so we don't get mixed up in anything, and agree to put our request from earlier on the priority lane.”

“Sure...That should be no problem. There isn't much to explain. This is just some silly turf war. The Axle Heads have been always looking for opportunities to expand their business into our territory.”

“Business? You guys into extortion or what?”

“...Just medicinal remedies.”

Lana shook her head at the mention of street drugs. It wasn't a rare thing to come across, especially in her short career as a mercenary, but her corporate upbringing made her flinch at the idiotic things people did.

From a corpo's standpoint, drugs were the worst type of commodity for both ends of the market.

The buyers got addicted and became less productive members of society and would likely be affected to the point of preventing them from working normally. This meant the corporation's market would shrink. That wasn't even considering how it may negatively impact their own employee's performance.

That was why narcotics was something normally only dealt with by gangs.

Having confirmed they weren't sticking their business into other corporations' business, Thorne sprang into action. He swiftly made his way down toward the fighting on the first floor and found an ongoing shootout in the middle of the bar.

The defenders were using the bar counter and various chairs as cover, shooting out at the enemies who were invading from the entrance. The only reason they were being pushed back was because of a giant hole that the previous explosion had caused. It allowed the assailants an extra entry point from a different angle, dividing the defenders' attention.

Having seen that both parties were only equipped with small arms, Thorne decided to simply rush into the fray. He released the camouflage projection, revealing his power armor to the world, and descended into the group of attacks by the entrance.

When they made eye contact with the power armor, they all widened their eyes in disbelief and their morale plummeted.

“A power armor?! What in the world? How did the Grindhouse Rebels get ahold of that?”

“Retreat, retreat! We need heavy firepower to deal with that!”

As they tried to back away, they continued to fire off their guns helplessly at Thorne. The few bullets that landed only bounced off the power armor. Soon, Thorne had caught up to them and began swinging down his wrist blade.

He only bisected the two closest to him before he stopped. The assailants ran fast and Thorne had no incentive to hunt them down. He had already done his duty to fight off the attack and earn the Grindhouse Rebels' gratitude.

I hope this is enough for them to work their hardest for us.

I watched as the latest batch of test subjects was awoken from their slumber after their implant surgery.

Nova Tech had worked fast after identifying a potential new feature they could add to their product. Despite not having a proper prototype, they reused an older model bio-processor that was modified with the new neural link function.

They had it installed into the subjects immediately, which brings us to now.

“Each team will receive ten subjects. The tests we want you to perform have already been compiled. Do not deviate and follow the instructions exactly. Am I understood?” the Senior Researcher in charge of lab three declared.

Several yeses could be heard in unison before he walked off toward a corner of the lab.

“Let's go, Rollo. You bring up the rear.”

Immediately after those words, my superior, Cora, shoved a taser in my hand and began leading her group of ten subjects. As they formed neat orderly lines as they traveled to our testing chambers, I brought up the rear as instructed.

I wanted to converse with these subjects, but I knew various monitoring equipment was watching and listening, so I opted to employ my patience instead.

I planned to kill two birds with one stone. To help them escape, and at the same time, gain information on this base's security first hand.

It wasn't a long wait because I planned to breach into their SAID system the moment they were hooked up to our terminals for monitoring. I had root access to the terminals in our testing ground, so infecting these test subjects through the connection was an easy task.

I did just that the moment they were ordered to take a seat and be hooked up to monitor their vitals.

It was only after I ensured I had a channel of communication with these test subjects that I began doing the work Cora had assigned me for real.

"So Cora...What kind of tests were we assigned?" I asked as I continued to type away on my terminal.

"Hmm, we got the boring stuff, I think. All virtual and augmented reality tests for their basic reaction time. We're comparing the speed of their VR avatars compared to the AR version."

From how I understood it, the virtual reality was calibrated to be realistic, like how they moved a normal bio-coprocessor of the same model, minus the neural link function. The AR version would have the results from the new prototype to compare with. We were basically trying to confirm if this neural link feature actually improved the movements of the user.

As exciting as that sounded, we simply watched on as the terminals did most of the work, presenting our subjects with various stimuli. The test lasted for half a day, and within the first three hours, one of our subjects suddenly convulsed before their vitals went flat.

"Report. Subject #084 is confirmed deceased," one of the assistants declared.

"Call the cleaners but continue with the tests," Cora commanded.

As I watched the so-called cleaners take the body away, I couldn't help but take in that I was an accessory to these experiments. I had performed similar things myself to harvesters, so I couldn't speak out too harshly against the test, but it still made me sick, having read these people's profiles.

Like I had suspected, they were simply innocent residents of Elevate City who had been taken from their homes. I tried to rein in my guilt as the experiments continued.

There was nothing I could do in my position, at least not quickly. I needed to come up with a workable plan for their escape. The rational part of me told me I should sit quietly and wait for my guardian angel instead. However, I didn't think it'd hurt to have someone go first in escaping before I made my attempt.

Even if I came up with the perfect plan, I wouldn't be able to join them. It would make my enemies target my company again, and I needed my guardian angel to return to keep my enemies in check.

Despite not participating in the escape itself, I couldn't help but be excited. I wanted to test my mettle against the facility. I also wanted to get a look at any potential hidden defenses they had in place. It was much better than being surprised by hidden trump cards later on.

I didn't have the luxury to brew up a plan while working, so I obediently performed my job and waited until I was free.

A good plan needed time to put together. It was counterproductive to rush something that had so many lives on the line. After all, I had counted almost a hundred test subjects just from this first round of testing alone.

I heaved a sigh of relief as the experiments for the day were finished, and no new casualties occurred in our group. The subjects were returned to the main lab, where they were forced back into their fenced-off enclosure.

"Are we going to keep them in the lab like this throughout this entire project? Don't we have rooms we could put them in?" I asked after seeing off the last subject.

"Hmm, it's easier to manage when they're all together. Every little bit of budget we save from their maintenance goes to our research."

"I see..."

We ended the day off by analyzing the new data we got and I returned to my room under escort once again. Seeing the subjects made me thankful I received my own room, since our situation wasn't so different. If I hadn't proved my worth to Nova Tech or had a powerful backer, I could've easily ended up in their boat.

Once I had a meal and settled down, I finally activated the new communication channel I had rigged up.

I had access to the basic files on the ten subjects I was responsible for, so I chose to contact a woman who seemed to be a pillar in her circle. She apparently had a daughter still in Elevate City, so her motivation to get out of here was strong.

Polina Burges, how are you doing?

I waited for a moment for her response. I was sure my message flashed by in her optics, and she couldn't have missed it. It was understandable she would be surprised at the sudden message, though.

After a full minute, I finally received a response.

Who is this? How are you in my system? Are you one of the people here?

Yes, but I want to help you. Do you have any idea where you are?

...No, I was minding my own business in my home when I suddenly found myself here. Some of my neighbors are here too, with their kids...

Well, this isn't Elevate City anymore. I gave her a moment to let that sink in before sending the next message. *We're in Ceres Station. If you want to go home, we'll have to plan things out slowly. Are you able to unite everyone around you?*

What? No, I've only stayed with the people I knew.

You'll have to work on that first, then. I can't get you out of here without more help from you guys.

I continued messaging the woman late into the night, explaining to her about her situation and what we needed to break them out. The most essential thing she had to look out for, besides becoming a leader among her fellow test subjects, was to find someone who could fly a spaceship. Otherwise, getting out of here was only a pipedream.