

Chapter 163: Life in a Rock

After completing the tests Dr. Chen had given to test out my capabilities, he simply retrieved the handheld terminal and left.

That was three days ago.

I hadn't heard from anyone since and spent my days stuck in my 'complimentary room'. While the terminal here wasn't connected to the internet, at least it had a vast catalog of shows and movies to consume.

However, thanks to their lax inspection of me, I still had my own terminal hidden within my body. I used that to kill time, working on the designs for the set of cybernetics that complimented the Jaden cyber legs I made for the volleyball team. There was a limit to how much I could do on just an internal terminal, but it was better than making no progress at all.

Is this what jail is like? No, from what I heard back in the days, they at least had other inmates and could do things like work out or basketball. I, on the other hand...

My entire being snapped to attention at the sound of the door opening.

"Mr. Halls, come with me," a man's voice came out of the power armor by the doorway.

The helmet was opaque so I couldn't get a view of the face behind it, but from the voice, I believe it was the same guard who had led that interrogator to me last time.

I complied and swiftly followed him out into the cold metal hallways of whatever facility I was in.

During our walk, I tried glancing around for any hints, particularly for a window of some sort or markings. I wanted to find some clues about where I was because just knowing I was in space didn't cut it.

Even if my guardian angel came to save me, I doubt it would happen diplomatically. I needed to be prepared if anything went down.

"Keep walking," the cold voice resounded from the power armor.

"Okay, okay. I got it. I was just curious about this place after holding up in my room for days. What is your name, anyway?" I replied as I tried to gain information from chatting up the guard.

He didn't reply and wordlessly urged me forward.

"Come on, I haven't talked to anyone for some time. You can at least humor me with your name, right?"

"...It's Poltrix." He replied in a tone that was half speaking and half sighing.

“So, Poltrix, how long have you worked for this Nova Tech?”

“...”

Again, no reply came, so I pressed on.

“What? Don’t tell me you’re new? I thought this was a secure base and they let rookies guard it?”

“I am the commander of the garrison here... Rest assured, we will protect you from any threats.”

“Oh, so it’s Commander Poltrix! What an honor to be escorted by you in person.”

“...”

The commander’s acting ability was horrible, to say the least. His attempt at reassuring me that he was here to protect me was laughable, at best. Still, I humored him as we continued walking down the empty white corridors.

“Anyway, Commander. Do you eat the same stuff they have been feeding me? All this synthetic shit is making me go insane. Not that I don’t understand how much harder it is to get real food with the logistics of being in space.”

“...Spacer standards are higher than planetside. It’s just this facility emphasizes efficiency rather than luxury. No more talking, we’re almost there.”

We arrived at an elevator and after going up several floors; we found ourselves outside a set of reinforced blast doors that was basically two large chunks of metal. We stood still for several dozen seconds before it opened.

We went into an airlock where we were soaked in some kind of gas before we got through to the other side.

When the second set of blast doors opened, I found a spacious and neatly organized lab. It had all the equipment you could ask for when performing R&D. There was even a large room enclosed in glass that was actually a 3D printer.

I saw dozens of people in the same lab coat Dr. Chen had worn, operating the equipment in the room or rushing around to attend to their own affairs. One of them stood out as she simply stood there by the entrance, looking our way.

She had long brown hair tied into a ponytail and wore a set of glasses, which was a rare sight in this world.

“Welcome to laboratory number three. I am Junior Researcher Cora, and you will be working under me as per the instructions of Dr. Chen.” She glanced over at Commander Poltrix and bowed politely to him. “Thank you, Commander Poltrix. I can take over from here.”

The man in the power armor wordlessly strode out of the room, and Cora immediately pulled me along.

“Let us be quick, Mr. Halls. We have quite a few things on schedule today. I’ve been told if you hinder us in any way, you’d be kicked out. I’ll try my best to help you get started, but I’ve got my own work to deal with, so just try to keep up.”

We quickly headed for one of the doors on the side of the lab that led to another cold white hallway. However, every few paces, there was a window that looked out into a large cubic room.

The first room I passed by contained two bots, arm-wrestling with each other. Several researchers were carefully studying the terminals beside them as they monitored the tests.

In the second room I saw, I found a lone bot holding out his cybernetic hand toward the other end of the room, where several targets were set up. The hand quickly transformed into a cannon that fired a powerful round that penetrated its target cleanly.

I didn’t get to see what was in the third room before I was pulled through another set of doors. After descending the stairs, we found ourselves inside one of the cubic rooms I had seen. There were half a dozen others already in the room, all standing around impatiently.

When they saw us enter, they immediately straightened their backs.

“We’ll be starting the tests immediately. Assistants, get to your posts,” Cora declared. “As for you, Rollo, you’ll be monitoring the results with me. Feel free to voice out any observations or suggestions you may have at improving our product.”

As I followed her toward the area with all the terminals to monitor the test, I glanced over and found another bot equipped with the same model of cyberarm I had seen in the other rooms.

“Can you send me the file on the cybernetic we’re testing?”

“That...I cannot do that. I’m afraid only our company researchers are allowed access to its schematics. You are currently registered as a junior assistant. You’ll have to work your way up to gain the relevant permission levels.”

“...You want me to give recommendations on something I don’t have the schematics to?”

“...Yes. It’s the best compromise we could get you. It’s either this or you start from scratch, doing the jobs of what the other assistants are doing.” She tilted her head over at the others in the room.

They were scrambling to accomplish their tasks, performing the last checks before we got the experiments underway.

From the closeup of the screens beside me, I could see them frantically crunching the numbers again to verify the calculations. They adjusted the cyberarm to properly fit with the bot and prepared emergency response measures should the tests go awry.

They were all tedious tasks that I would prefer not to do, which was why I usually delegated them to someone else.

“I understand...but still, what’s the point in hiding the schematics but showing me the tests?”

“That...is a decision made by the higher-ups and not something I can speak for.”

Our conversation was cut short as all the assistants completed their checks and the experiments began.

Although I didn’t get briefed, it didn’t take long for me to figure out what the tests taking place in this room were for.

The bot was patrolling in a circle while holding onto a fake firearm when one of the assistants shot out a round from a grenade launcher at it. The grenade exploded in a familiar fashion that told me it was an EMP round. The bot’s overall movements weren’t hindered and continued to walk around. However, the cybernetic arm it was equipped it swung at a visibly slower speed than before.

Next, the same assistant fired several rounds from a pistol at it. The metallic sound of the bullets hitting metal resounded in the room, but nothing else happened. Instead, the action was taking place on the screens before me as the assistant began to hack into the bot’s systems.

I could see the SAID was a run-of-the-mill model from Zenitech, which the assistant bypassed easily. It was the part that came after that was more interesting. Despite the assistant gaining full control of the SAID, the rogue commands it tried to issue to the bot were completely ignored.

When the assistant then tried to remedy the situation by accessing the software of the arm, they were thwarted even after ten minutes of trying, unlike before.

“Are electronic defenses the only thing you’re testing against today?” I muttered as I got tired of the assistant’s pathetic attempts.

“No...we’re scheduled to do the more physical aspects of its defenses in the afternoon. We’ll need to submit the observation report and recommendations for this test first before that happens, though,” Cora replied as she meaningfully glanced at me.

“...You want me to do it?” I glared back and her look told me everything. “Can I use the terminal here?”

She gestured for me to go ahead, so I quickly sat down on the table adjacent to one of the assistants and started up the terminal beside his.

As I had suspected, even this terminal couldn't access the web. I wasn't sure if it was because it wasn't common to access it out in the part of space I was in or if this entire facility was off the grid. My only experience up here was in Aegis, but it was hard to judge from that experience because it was so close to Earth.

I felt Cora's hovering just behind me, so I stopped dawdling and got to work. From what I observed, the EMP resistance of the current devices was subpar. It worked in the sense its user could keep fighting but at reduced performance.

While whatever countermeasures they had against electronic intrusion rounds were commendable in that they prevented hackers from using the user's cybernetic against themselves, it still became unusable junk the moment the enemy breached their SAID. With that said, I couldn't really fault Nova Tech as they weren't designing a SAID here.

However, this gave me a few inspirations for when I designed my own ecosystem of cybernetics. There were unique advantages I had compared to other companies, and I had full intentions of making use of it.

I couldn't just end the report with 'captain obvious' insights, though. Not if I wanted to increase my clearance level so I could learn more from them. It was the perfect opportunity to make use of their misconception that I'd never escape from them to grasp their tech.

Still, I needed to make progress in learning the ins and outs of this facility. If my prediction was right, the biggest challenge my guardian angel faced when attempting to rescue me was to prevent them from finishing me off during a rescue mission.

It was in true corpo fashion to deny their enemies their prize. If he tried to rescue me and it was apparent that he would soon succeed, nothing stopped my captives from ending me. I doubted even my guardian angel could pull off a completely stealth mission when we were in such an isolated and secure facility.

If the role was reversed, could I infiltrate this facility myself? I didn't have any resources off-planet, and would likely have to spend quite some time coming up with various solutions to avoid detection...

I opened my status screen, and I mulled over how much I could shorten that time if I upgraded stealth tech or other enhancements.

Status	
Level:	25
EXP:	160/2500
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 +11 ● 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

Come to think of it...Can I somehow gain experience points while I'm here? I might be able to solve the survival problem during a rescue mission if I level up my oldest skill, stealth, or even something else...

With that, I couldn't help but glance over at Cora and her fellow assistants.