

# Chapter 155: Hop! Step! Jump!

## Burksby - Halls Corporation

Inside one of the largest gymnasiums in Elevate City, the volleyball tournament held by an executive from SocialCorp swiftly got started as soon as the opening speech ended.

There was an impressive prize pool, as expected from SocialCorp, but the majority of teams here had a different objective, drawing the host's attention. For many small and medium-sized corporations, getting into the good grace of SocialCorp meant better business opportunities, security, connections, and more.

On one side of a court, a well-built man began doing warmup stretches while his teammates were all busy fine-tuning their cybernetic limbs.

"Burksby, are you sure you're in tip-top condition?" One of his teammates asked.

"Yes, when am I not?"

"Well, you never know with 'ganic limbs. Can't beat the reliability of cold hard machines." The man grinned as he flexed his cyberarms.

"Well, you can only use your cybernetic feet this time. Your arm's going to be limited and probably perform worse than these old 'ganic limbs."

"Got to keep it within reason or else we'd all be jet-packing around and destroying the ball." Another one of their teammates, named Trey, added.

The Halls Corporations team quickly got ready as their first match went on its way.

Burksby as the team setter immediately ran to his position by the net as soon as his team received the ball. He signaled his team to use their default formation as he prepared to set for his teammates.

He kept an eye on the enemy team's position before deciding to set their left-wing spiker.

*As much as the team is all crazy about their new hardware, it doesn't change the fact that it's up to us to perform well. They sure can jump all right, but I'm sure we can't overpower our opponents with just brawn.*

*Thankfully, this tournament will have a week's break after the two matches today. We just need to survive today. Thank you corpo host for forcing everyone to accommodate your work schedule.*

He spent a split second eyeing their opponent's cybernetics. Contrary to their team, the opposing team opted to have one cybernetic arm and one leg instead.

Burksby accounted for the increased height his teammates could now reach and set the ball. His teammate, Trey, jumped as he imagined and smashed the ball over the opposing two-man block.

*...Maybe not.*

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As the volleyball tournament went on its way, I sat back and glanced around the venue.

We had our own little section to ourselves, and the other corporations did as well. I glanced over at the section for the host, a floating platform hovering just above the courts.

*If I can form a good connection with this executive from SocialCorp, it might be possible for me to attain some of their more exclusive cassettes, too...*

As I stared up at the platform, one of the guards standing on it snapped his gaze onto me. I amicably nodded his way before directing my gaze elsewhere while I was really reviewing the recording I had of him.

He was an elite guard under SocialCorp, which meant I could expect him to be one of the best-equipped security personnel in the city.

At first glance, he appeared like a regular bulky cyborg that you would see on the street. It was completely different from what I had seen up in space when I visited the Ferrumus Corporation.

Their cyborgs were much more streamlined, and their movements were agile and precise.

*I wish I could see these guys in action too.*

I wasn't too familiar with the sport, so I didn't really understand the intricate tactics the players were employing down below. Thorne watched our team play carefully while I was preparing myself for a new research project once I returned.

It had come to my attention that there were a few pressing things I wanted to address before completing the set of cybernetics that went along with the Hermes. As much as the cybernetic project could potentially strengthen our security department, I first wanted to deal with the worry that had sprouted up within me when we infiltrated Sensorial Corp.

We had placed a spy implant inside Luford to monitor the situation, which meant large corporations could potentially do the same to us. That was why I wanted to install a jammer similar to QuickLink Logistics where their entire place was blocked off from outside signals.

With electrical engineering knowledge, I planned to create something a little more sophisticated. With Lanus around now, I could have all the traffic go through it, so it could be monitored. For that to happen, we would need to expand on the hardware specification for our AI, but it should be sufficient for now.

The cassette project didn't need any intensive resources anymore, as it mainly required Lanus to monitor the subject's condition. Which meant I could handle one more project right now.

For that new slot, it was a given I wanted to finish up the power armor with it.

As I closed my eyes while deep in thought, the sound of cheering drew my attention back to reality.

I glanced down to see one of the teams celebrating their victory. Even the host from SocialCorp was leaning over the edge of his platform as he excitedly looked down at the spectacle below.

That was when one of the spectators in the stand below decided it was a good idea to aggressively pull out something from their pocket and point it straight at the executive. I watched as the bodyguard who had stared at me on the platform instantly turned into a blur as he jumped down from the floating platform.

Before anyone knew what happened, the bodyguard was standing right beside the guy who had been trying to snap a photo of the platform with a handheld terminal.

"You think that guy is faster than the guy we saw at Ferrumus?" I turned to my friend, Thorne.

"...Hard to say when all he did was jump down from the platform. I'd say his reaction is at least on par, though. Still, I'm sure there's a lot up his sleeves. Ferrumus guy had a sword that could easily slice through power armor, so it only made sense that SocialCorp had a few trump cards as well."

If there was one takeaway from that display, it would seem speed and reaction time were the most basic requirements in higher-level combat. Thankfully, my power armor was already designed with mobility in mind.

The first day of the tournament soon ended after every team played two matches. We had faced up against a small G-Class corporation and an F-Class, so we ended the day with two victories.

Our team celebrated on our return trip and I decided to treat them to a feast. Well, it wasn't that different from what I normally ate, except in catering portions.

I took the opportunity to order some good ol' pizza, all with different toppings. It was the best party food and enabled me to try various flavors.

When I returned to my lab, Lanus immediately gave me its latest report.

"Report. We are on track to finish our first viable cassette within the week."

“Hmm? What made you so confident in your estimates suddenly?”

“Reply. Our latest tests show the information is mostly passing through the major neurological pathways, which means we only need to optimize the current iteration.”

“Understood. Prepare to run a knowledge retention test once it is complete. We’ll need to see how effective it is at imparting knowledge to the users.”

“Acknowledged.”

“Good, moving on then. Are you prepared to get started on the project to replicate the energy shield device?”

“Affirmative, to simply replicate, with no need to understand the underlying principles of the device in question, should be doable within two weeks. The main challenge is to accurately analyze the material makeup of the device and find viable production methods.”

“That...I’ve tried using a spectrometer, but it isn’t showing me anything coherent. Whoever made it coated it with something...”

“Recommendation. Procure alternative material analyzers and allow me to reference online databases in real-time.”

“Online databases? Corporations don’t really keep much available for the public.”

“Addendum. I have been informed that the ‘dark web’ is still thriving among the various neutral parties and has many reference data at attempts to reverse engineer corporate products.”

*Informed? Must be Leo, then...*

“Fine, but we need to finish the project to jam all connections within the vicinity of our base first, then. We can mask your activity more easily when everything is going through one central node. Make sure you don’t do too much and alert anyone...”

I was somewhat worried about giving Lanus access to the outside network. It would become others to discover Lanus’ existence. It may have been the reason why I waited until I got software engineering past ten points before I created it, but I had a feeling there were other AIs out there somewhere.

It just made no sense that I could do it alone while the corporations with both time and money hadn’t accomplished it yet.

Having Lanus around for just a short amount of time had made me privy to just how much of an advantage it was. I refused to believe that other corporations would be willing to give up such an asset.

*They must be enforcing the anti-AI rules above board to keep others from catching up with them.*

“Report. Schematics for wide area jamming device found in the database. We can have it implemented in a few days. Proceed?”

“No, let’s make some changes to it. We can work on this together. It...shouldn’t take too much longer.”

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A little more than a week later, I successfully completed our new company-wide jamming device with Lanus. The majority of the time was spent on assembling the large hardware parts of the device. It wasn’t that big in comparison to our entire compound, but I rarely worked on devices that took up half a room.

The theory of it was simple: jamming was just spamming the communication channels into Armageddon, but the tricky part was how to allow select channels through. Then, there was the question of security. If we allowed an encrypted frequency to go through, our enemies could potentially make use of that loophole as well.

That was why we added a central server node that went by Lanus, so it could monitor all communications going in and out from the whitelisted comms unit.

I completed this project just in time to be summoned to the volleyball tournament venue again. It seems our team managed to get to the semi-finals, losing to the eventual champions. It wasn’t the most ideal result, but it still gave me a good chance to approach this SocialCorp executive during the award ceremony today.

Our convoy quickly arrived at the highly secure venue and I met up with our employees inside the gymnasium.

“Good job, everyone. Expect a raise for your performance.” I declared as I patted each of them on the shoulder.

Thorne talked to them some more before the award ceremony soon began.

Every team was neatly lined up as the host hovered just above us, giving out a speech. Then, the captain of each team was summoned to receive their medals and prizes before the event turned into an all-out buffet.

I took the time to size up the environment and watched the various other corpos butter up the SocialCorp executive. It seemed like there was some understanding that the teams that placed well got to interact with the man first, which meant it wasn’t long before it was my turn to greet the host.

I walked over to the lanky researcher with lollipop glasses, who was now wearing a volleyball jersey for some reason, and shook his hand.

“Thank you for hosting such a wonderful event, Mr. Kenneth. It was a pleasure to attend.”

He glanced at me for a second and adjusted his glasses before responding.

“Ah, Mr. Halls, from the upstart company that has been making waves recently.”

“I’m honored that you know of me, but my company really isn’t much. We are only an F-Class corporation, but we would love more opportunities to connect and see if there are any chances we can pursue together.”

“I wouldn’t say getting to F-Class in such a short time, ‘not much’. It might be more appropriate to say you’ve jumped quite high, and your momentum is still going strong. Rumors about your company have even been making rounds among the social gatherings I’ve attended. I wouldn’t dare underestimate you.” He replied with a sarcastic grin.

*Wait, rumors have been going on about us among the top dogs? Why? I don’t think we’re noteworthy enough to reach their ears...*

“Mr. Kenneth, I’m not sure what these rumors are about, but I’d love to join one in on these gatherings so I can present the facts to all interested parties.”

He brought a hand to his chin as he put on a thoughtful look.

“Hmm, that could be entertaining, yes. I’ll see what I can do.”