

# Chapter 164: The New Normal

Noticing my gaze, Cora swiftly turned to face me.

“What is it? Found something?”

“...Hmm, no. I was just wondering if you guys do live combat tests against mutants or something, too.”

“No, we do what we are assigned, and that means testing the durability of the product against electronic hazards, whether it be software or hardware.”

“I see...”

As I began typing away on the terminal, I quickly shelved away any impulsive thoughts. There was a time and place for everything, and it wasn't time yet to be making demands when I hadn't earned their trust yet. Maybe later, I could make requests to perform experiments with mutants or something so I could earn experience points.

It took me a full hour to complete the observation report and recommendations to R&D. With plus ten in electrical engineering, and eleven in software engineering, I had plenty of recommendations. Of course, I kept most of them to myself and only gave them a few low-hanging fruits to show my value to them.

I couldn't give them nothing at all, as they currently believed I was some genius that my mysterious savior recruited and trained for his schemes. I needed them to believe it was in their interest that they had 'robbed' me for their own benefit.

“There, finished. Should I send it to you or to someone else?” I asked the woman hanging over my shoulder.

“Relay it to me. I'll do a final check before sending it off.”

“Understood.”

It only took Cora several minutes to go through my hour of hard work.

“Okay, looks good. I believe we deserve a short lunch breach before moving on to our afternoon schedule.”

*What did you mean by 'we'? It was all me...*

The junior researcher quickly led us out of the large cubicle room and back out to the main lab outside. We went down the hallway in the opposite direction this time, and after a few turns down the hallway, we arrived at a cafeteria.

There were a few dozen tables around, with only half of them filled. The occupants ranged from fellow researchers to security personnel.

However, instead of someone or a bot manning the counter to hand out food, they had a fancy-looking 3D printer instead.

Cora didn't bother to explain and headed straight to the printers. She keyed in several commands on the terminal. After a second, the 3D printer got to work and printed out a plate of blocky sushi within seconds.

"Go ahead, I'll get a table first."

Left to my own device, I awkwardly navigated through the menus of the 3D food printer. There was a wide selection, but no matter how alluring the food sounded, I couldn't help but think it would taste disgusting.

And I was right.

After selecting what I thought to be the safest option, a pizza, I was rewarded with a mouthful of dense, rubbery substance that had a chemical-like aftertaste. I took a deep breath and swallowed while trying to distract myself with other thoughts.

*I guess it was too much to think they would have anything good in an employee cafeteria. How cheap can they be when they are an A-Class corporation with multi-billion credit revenue?*

As I promised myself that I would never be such a cheapskate, I quickly stood up to place another order at the 3D printer. I've learned my lesson and the only synthetic food I could palate was a good ol' milkshake.

"So, about the recommendations you made. Are you sure they would work or are you just speculating? I have to admit, they seemed pretty convincing."

I took a big sip from my drink to wash away the nasty aftertaste before responding.

"I've never tested out something so complicated before, but the theory is all sound."

"I see...Where did you study, by the way? I'm surprised you were able to make sense of our product so quickly without access to our internal knowledge base to refer to."

I had to force myself not to raise an eyebrow. I wasn't sure if she was just uninformed or was trying to fish information out of me, but either way, I would answer politely.

"I grew up in Elevate City all my life."

"Oh? Which corp?"

"...SocialCorp—"

“What?! Really?!” she squealed.

“Let me finish.” I shook my head to calm her down. “In a SocialCorp-sponsored orphanage.”

“Oh...”

It wasn't long before we finished our lunches and we made our way back to the same spacious cubic room to perform a new round of tests on Nova Tech's latest cyberarm.

I didn't nearly give them as many recommendations for the mechanical engineering aspect, which was more relevant to the physical defenses of the cybernetic, as it wasn't in my ballpark.

The day soon ended after compiling my second report. It felt short, considering I had something to do instead of just sitting around in my room. We had a quick supper after the tests before Commander Poltrix returned to escort me back to my room.

“So how did your day go, commander?” I asked as soon as we were alone. He ignored me, so I continued. “I did pretty well. Thank you for asking. We went through two rounds of testing that—”

He suddenly stopped moving, and I almost crashed into his power armor.

“Do I have to remind you to keep quiet about what happens in the lab?”

I smirked at getting a response out of him. No matter the reason, the more he spoke to me, the more likely he would let his guard down around me eventually. I found it somewhat fun, channeling my inner Claire.

*This can get addictive. Maybe that's why she's like this all the time...*

“Oh, come on, it's just the two of us here. As the commander of this base, you're qualified to know everything I know at the very least, right?”

“Doesn't matter. Others could overhear us,” he scoffed as he began picking up his pace again.

“Okay, okay. We can talk about something more harmless. So how often do you guys get an off day...? You guys can't possibly stay in this isolated base every day of the year, right?”

I could hear him sigh as we continued making our way back to my room.

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The next day, I was brought right back to laboratory number three and Cora once again greeted me. We went through another morning of testing, doing the exact same thing from the previous morning, but I could tell the cyberarm we were testing wasn't the same. They had implemented the recommendations I made and several other minor adjustments.

“File your observation report and then we can go to lunch.” Cora declared as she stretched her back.

“I don’t have to include a recommendation this time?”

“Company protocol, this iteration was based on your recommendation, so you must hear out other researchers’ ideas first before giving any further input. Congratulations, it is an honor to have your changes accepted so readily.”

*Throughout one night, they had already gathered all their researcher’s feedback and selected the optimal one? They sure do work fast...*

“Do I get a bonus or something?”

“...” she gave me a weird look before diving into her reports.

I quickly realized it was likely because it was frowned upon in corpo culture to blatantly ask for raises and the like. It wasn’t something I had to care about until now, being the boss and all, so I had a slip of the tongue.

I shook my head as I got to work on my report as well.

Once we were done, we repeated the same routine and went to lunch. Unfortunately, people had to eat to survive, but I made sure to wash down whatever junk I ate with ample milkshakes.

“So, Cora. Do the researchers here stay on this base forever, or do you guys get some time off?” I repeated the question I posed to the commander yesterday.

“Well, at my rank, I get one day off every two months.”

“And how do you spend that day off? Just laze around in your room?”

“What? Of course not. I’d spend it in Ceres Station, where there are actually things to do.”

Finally, I figured out I was held near Ceres Station. Thankfully, that was a name I was familiar with, which meant I knew I was somewhere between Mars and Jupiter. This is definitely the furthest I’d ever been from Earth. It could’ve been worse, so I couldn’t exactly complain.

“As an assistant, do you think I’d get to go there on my day off as well?”

“Hmm, I don’t know... I haven’t been informed about that. I’ll try asking for you.”

“Thank you!”

“No problem. Anyway, let’s focus on our tests this afternoon. I want us to do better results than those bitches in lab two this month.”

“Okay...”

She glanced at me and I saw the realization hit her as she remembered I wouldn't know anything about what she was talking about.

“Don't worry about it...Just know that I want to do well, so I can get promoted to an associate researcher already.”

“You've been working as a Junior Researcher for how long?”

“...Too long, which is why I want that promotion! If you can help me out, I'll be sure to look after you as well once I get promoted.”

“Sure...I'll see what I can do. Can you get me the clearance to access the details of what we actually work on first? It's not easy for me to do anything when you guys are withholding so much information.”

“I'll speak to Dr. Chen about it.”

“Thank you.”

Now then. Since I learned about this nearby space station, it was time for me to visit it in person. They had generously given me access to various terminals connected with their internal system, so I just needed to put my software skills to work.

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### **Claire - Halls Corporation**

“Any new updates?” Thorne asked for the umpteenth time upon entering Claire's office.

“No. Everything's been quiet. No action was taken against us, the company, or anything.”

“I see...”

“...Do you think Rollo can really escape whenever he wants, like he said? I get his stealth tech is impressive, but he'd be stranded in space or something even if he escaped, right? It's not like he can suddenly create a stealth ship while in captive.”

“He...should be fine if it's just surviving...” Thorne let out a sigh. “He'll have to rely on his helper to get home, though. And that is what worries me the most. I mean, it's a corpo we're talking about. There is a high chance that he doesn't think it's worth saving Rollo anymore, then he'd be stuck.”

The two sighed in unison before Thorne got up from his seat.

“Anyway, I’m going to head over to the security department now. Good luck on maintaining all our existing business relationships...” Shaking his head, Thorne exited the room.

Now that Rollo was gone, Claire had taken over all his usual duties. While the bureaucratic work was fine, managing relations was another thing.

Taking a deep breath, Claire steeled her resolve as she made her way to Rollo’s meeting room, which was equipped with holographic projectors. She connected with the first partner she would be meeting with today.

“Good day to you, Mr. Perez. Thank you for making the time to update us on the projects yourself.”

“Think nothing of it. It’s my pleasure to talk to a beautiful lady such as yourself. Anyway, I take it that Rollo is still away?”

“...That is right, he went out into the wasteland like he usually does, but this time, he said he might be gone for a while. I apologize on his behalf.”

“Oh, no, no. I don’t mind. As I said, I prefer to deal with you, and I really mean it.”

*I thought Rollo always said he was good friends with this Luford Perez person...How come he seems so reluctant to see Rollo again?*

The call soon ended after some updates about their partnered projects, and Claire sighed in relief. It wasn’t easy dealing with these leaders of various corporations. This was doubly so, considering she had to lie about Rollo’s whereabouts. However, for his next meeting, she wouldn’t have that luxury.

“Ms. Claire, I’m happy to see you again. If you’re here, I take it that Rollo is still missing... Unfortunately, this means my company will have to rethink our relationship with yours during these troubling times,” Joey, the head of Authentic Corp, dryly stated.

“I understand, Mr. Moretti. I just ask that we keep our existing deals as it is for now.”

“Of course, I will uphold the contracts for the specified duration.”

The call ended shortly after that, and Claire slumped into her chair. She had been hopeful when Joey had first hinted that he knew about their current situation because she wanted his help. She knew Authentic Corp had connections with the bigger corporations, but her excitement was instantly doused when the bald man clearly drew a line with them.

The fact he knew their situation meant that he knew the Halls Corporation had come into conflict with a party that he couldn’t afford to offend. In true corpo fashion, when the relationship could potentially hinder them, they took a step back to ensure their interests.

Claire swung her seat around so she would be facing out the window of Rollo's office. Her office was just next door, but Rollo's view felt much broader. It was beautiful, which made the mantle of defending what they had that much heavier.

*When will you come back?*