

Chapter 153: Neurological Pathways

“So, is there no better way to test how each cassette will affect the neurological pathways?” I asked the sentient AI.

“Negative. No reliable formula could be observed. It may be due to missing variables or my lack of ability.”

I closed my eyes and rubbed my chin as I brainstormed ideas and digest all the information Lanus had given me.

Lanus had informed me of the hypothesis it had on why our test subjects sometimes reacted so violently to the process of hyper-speed sleep learning. It had detailed biometrics of all our participants, so it was no surprise it had to do with that information.

My AI had brought up a neurological scan of several participants for me to see while it explained to me how the hypnopaedia process had affected the pathways in their brains.

It seemed like flooding their brain with so much information was akin to unleashing thousands and thousands of cars into a city at once. It caused a traffic jam in their brain that interfered with the other vital functions that one needed to live.

Lanus explained how each person’s brain was different and the reason why some of them were okay was because the traffic jam didn’t happen to the essential bits of their brain.

“Okay, Lanus. Let’s see if we can copy SocialCorp’s homework, then. Time for another round of testing using the cassettes SocialCorp made. Those should be safe for our subjects even after their earlier ordeal, right?”

“Conjecture. There is a high chance of it to be safe, but chances of worsening their condition cannot be entirely discounted.”

“Go ahead and proceed. I’ll tell medical to cart them back in. I’ll also go grab more subjects tonight as well.”

“Affirmative.”

After dark, I went with Thorne to procure more research participants.

With a solid cause to work toward, we happily spent credits to hire QGs for the location of various harvester dens.

Only Thorne and I hit the dens as we wanted as few people involved in our experiments as possible. Our excursion also acted as a test for the other prototype I had been working on.

“...I thought you said it’ll be a while until you completed this,” Thorne muttered as he scrutinized the power armor I was wearing.

“It’s not exactly complete. I had finished most of it, so Lanus only needed to do a quick pass to ensure I didn’t miss anything.”

“It looks... flimsy in comparison to the previous model. Are you sure that thing will be okay?”

“It’ll be fine against the small arms harvesters have. It’s missing a core function that I haven’t had the chance to finish yet, but once it’s done, it should become much more durable.”

He gave me a skeptical look, but didn’t say anything as we moved out.

The new power armor I designed was a size smaller than the old one we used. It was still considered a medium-sized power armor, but it was definitely on the lightweight side for mobility.

Its defensive shortcoming would be compensated by the energy shield tech that I would have Lanus work on once the cassettes and cybernetics were done with.

It hurt seeing my work so close to completion, but still had to be delayed.

It made me want to call up the corporation selling the processor chips to make another order to expand Lanus’ capabilities. Unfortunately, that would be too conspicuous.

Without an easy way to upgrade Lanus, I could only resort to employing my patience.

We soon arrived at the location Fitel provided us with, one of the megabuildings that had hundreds of floors and was crowded to the brim with people from all walks of life.

We turned on our Shades and had them project an image of the average resident as we blended into the crowd. As we went up the elevator, I glanced down at all the neon lights everywhere.

We passed floors that hosted a busy food market, commercial floors that were like a shopping mall, and an entire level dedicated to a gym.

People could practically live here their entire lives without stepping out...

We soon arrived at the floor where our target was and found it much more deserted than the floors below. All the trash cans around were tilted over and graffiti decorated everything in sight.

The few people who could be spotted wore sketchy masks and hoodies that covered their entire figure. They kept to themselves, and so did we.

We quickly hid behind a corner and breached into the camera systems before engaging our active camouflage.

With our invisibility, we headed straight for the suspected harvester's den.

The audacity these guys had to operate so close to the homes of so many people...

When we turned the corner, we could see a group of people camping out in the hallway. They brought out a table and chairs from somewhere and blocked the entire corridor.

I soon got a message from Thorne.

You want to do this like last time? Throw all these buffoons in a room as we clear the area?

Wait and see who they even are first. They might not be related. Then we'll bag them as we go.

We carefully stepped around them as we ventured further toward the apartment from our intel. As we got closer, we could hear the sound of an electric saw working.

I had done enough cybernetic installation to know that a bone was being used.

We gave ourselves a little tour of their place by unleashing several Nyes. From the camera feed, we soon found several men packing something into coolers.

Our Nye climbed up to a nearby table to get a better view. From there, we were able to decipher the contents within the containers. There were several coolers in the room, each packed to the brim with various human organs.

It was a lot more than what I usually saw in harvester dens, but I got my answers when my second Nye reached where their surgeon was operating.

What he was doing was surprisingly not ripping out the cybernetics of their poor victim, but instead harvesting their organs.

We're dealing with some bottomer feeders even among harvesters here... Thorne texted.

It took me a second to realize what he meant. The harvesters before us went after the easier marks who didn't sport any expensive cybernetics. Second-hand organs should be pretty inexpensive with the technology to grow a new one and various cybernetic alternatives. However, these scroungers didn't let the pittance of the organ trade go.

I had known since long ago that it costs a lot to grow new organs, and were practically exclusively to reach corpses.

I should've deducted that there was still demand for second-hand organs due to the high costs of a brand-new one. The dazzling cybernetic alternatives had blinded me to this fact. I'm sure

among many less well-off residents of the city, there would be some demand for these 'donor' organs from various medical conditions. It was natural for people who were struggling to go with the most economical option provided that it worked.

Before we could finish our tour of our new test subject's residence, the cameras outside alerted us to newcomers.

I watched the feed of three men carrying two large sacks toward us.

Seeing the scene, I grinned and messaged Thorne.

Hey, let's find where they keep those large burlap sacks and race to see who captures more of them.

You're on.

We both directed our Nyes to continue our tour of the place. Thorne soon found a stack of bags on the side of the room, and the race was on.

There's no way I would lose, right?

Nadia - Civilian

How did I get such bad luck? Not only am I barely getting by, I even got abducted today. To add salt to injury, these idiots didn't even get the dosage right and I'm still conscious.

Nadia cursed at her carelessly and how unfair fate was as her kidnappers continued to carry her back to their den.

She had thought she would be fine since she didn't have any expensive cybernetics worth stealing, but she realized too late that she was still a viable target.

I wonder what's these guy's deal are... I hope at least they aren't the sadistic killers who like to record their 'art'.

"Dog Face, you're back! What happened? How'd you get uglier in such a short time?" A voice called out to his friend, who was carrying a large sack over his shoulder.

"Yeah, yeah. Get out of the way already. Gotta get these guys to the doc."

Upon hearing the word, doc, from the person carrying her, Nadia grimaced. She knew she likely wasn't going to survive this mess, but it was hard for her to come to terms with this fact so suddenly.

“Oh, no rush. The doc is still busy. Why don’t you let me see what you have here while we wait? Maybe we can have some fun?”

Almost immediately after, Nadia felt someone pulling on the bag she was in. She closed her eyes and feigned unconscious while someone gripped her by the chin and angled it upward.

However, the man’s hand abruptly retreated.

“What the—?” The man carrying Nadia cried out.

Before he could finish his sentence, his mouth suddenly shut as he struggled to make a noise.

Nadia felt herself being dropped to the ground like a sack of potatoes. As scared as she was, she knew this was an opportunity, so she cautiously snuck a peek at her surroundings.

She was lying on the ground, with half her body still in the bag, but she was surprised to see several other bags around her on the ground. These bags were all visibly filled with a person.

Other victims?

Seeing how she didn’t spot anything, she got braver and sat up. A quick three-sixty later, she found that there was no one around her except for the people in the bags. She didn’t hesitate to open up the closest way to check on her fellow victims, but quickly came to regret it.

What she found was the face of the ugly guy who had cornered her on the way back from work.

...These are the harvesters! What is going on here? No... I don’t want to know.

Having suspected something that was beyond her was happening, Nadia quickly got up and made a run for it. She didn’t know where she was going, but she knew anywhere was better than staying here.

I felt refreshed after returning to our headquarters.

The little exercise we did to invite our new test subjects back with us helped me alleviate all my stress.

I couldn’t help but think back to how hard I laughed when we bagged the kidnappers using their own sacks. The look on their face, when they saw their allies suddenly disappear before reappearing inside those bags was priceless.

Once I properly secured our new guests, I quickly took a shower before returning to my workshop to check in with Lanus. My AI cum research partner had been overseeing the second round of tests with SocialCorp’s cassettes while I went out.

“Lanus, how are the experiments going?”

“Report. The tests were completed thirty-one minutes and two seconds ago. Results. We have found that the cassettes employed by SocialCorp are optimized to minimize the burden it has on the neurological pathways.”

“Did you figure out how they did so?”

“Negative. No conclusive method has been discovered. Addendum. No connections were found between all the SocialCorp cassettes we tested. I believe SocialCorp does not have a concrete method either and has employed trial and error to brute force their solutions.”

“So...you’re telling me there’s no magical method we can use and will have to just test around with thousands of test subjects as they do?”

“Negative. We will only need several dozen participants over several tests to create a functional cassette.”

“What? Aren’t we going to brute force it too?”

“Report. I can monitor how our subject reacts to our cassettes and abort the test as soon as the critical threshold has been reached. We simply need to keep restarting until we find the correct setup that will not overload the brain.”

So that means...Using the previous analogy, we are trying to find a way where we aren’t unleashing thousands of cars into a city at once in a disorderly manner. We need to find a way to keep those cars on the highway, so the city traffic isn’t paralyzed.

“How long do you estimate this trial-and-error method will take for us?”

“Prediction. It should take between one week to three months, granted we have enough test subjects working throughout the day.”

That fast? Well, I guess SocialCorp can do it even quicker if they employ thousands of participants at once. And they don’t care about their test subject’s survival either...

It was at this moment that a notification suddenly popped up in the corner of my eye and drew my attention.

+10 EXP

What? What happened?