

# Chapter 190: Reinforcing Foundation

## Grace - Halls Corporation

Almost half a year after Rollo's triumphant return from Nova Tech, the Halls Corporation was on the horizon to pick up steam in the corporate world again. While it sounded like a long time, it was the bare minimum they needed in order to establish their foundation so they could take their next step without fumbling.

Businesses took years to grow. If one rushed this process, it would reveal many vulnerabilities for others to exploit. In the ruthless corporate world of Elevate City, that was a death sentence.

The reason why the Halls Corporation was said to be picking up steam on this day was because of the opening of their new flagship store.

The new store was located in one of the most prestigious locations in Elevate City, the Oceanic Palace. It was the largest mall in the entire city and mainly catered to those of wealth. That meant the Halls Corporation's main clientele wouldn't often be seen there, but nevertheless, having a store there was a symbol within the corporate world.

Even with only a thousand square feet, it was no small matter to have a store there. It demonstrated not only their financial capabilities but also their connections.

Grace, a young woman who was recently hired, was to be stationed at this prestigious location. She watched on while wearing her well-practiced business smile as her company executives cut the ribbon to her new workplace.

She couldn't help but think back to the grueling training she had been put through. Only a foolish company would place complete greenhorns at their most important flagship. Even with Grace's ample experience in the retail industry, she had been put through the wringer before she was assigned to this store.

Throughout the opening ceremony, Grace kept to herself. There were many guests around, each wearing a small pin denoting which corporation they hailed from. All of them were from prestigious corporations, and Grace wanted to minimize the chance of offending any of these influential people as much as possible.

She was relieved when the celebrations died down. With the important-looking people taking their leave one after the other, the store employees were soon the only ones left.

"Gather around, people," the manager clapped to draw everyone's attention. "It's our first day, so we better start off strong. If you have any questions, you should ask them now."

The tall man took a second to glance at each of his employees. It didn't take long, as the store only retained eight of them.

“Then I’ll leave you guys to it. Those who aren’t on shift right now can leave. Those who are, keep sharp. Notify me immediately if something arises.”

The small crowd of employees only dispersed when their manager disappeared into his office. Some took their leave while those on shift spread out toward their stations. The store wasn’t the largest, but it still properly separated each category of products into their own sections.

For Grace, she was assigned to the cybernetic section, specifically for cyberarms. She had one partner in her section who dealt with cybernetic legs. She had heard rumors they would expand in the near future, but for now, it was just them two.

There were yet to be any clients, so Grace naturally began gossiping with her co-worker.

“Did you end up going over our entire catalog too, or was it just me?”

The man smirked and shook his head at her.

“So old habits got to you too? I guess we just can’t help it.”

“You can say that again. I’m too used to what companies usually expect of us. To just throw that all away because they told us to isn’t as easy as I thought. I keep getting an urge to learn the specifications of every single product like we normally do. It’s just ingrained into me.”

“Yeah, I get you. The pressure of having your pay deducted for failing to answer the clients’ questions gets to you.”

In the retail industry, it was the norm for workers to learn the details of every single product in their store. They had to deal with all types of clients that visited their store. To the businesses, it was just more efficient to have them learn everything, so whoever was free could address the next customer. It also added a layer of personalized shopping, having someone act as a butler or assistant of sorts, catering to the customer’s every need throughout their time in the store.

In the case of the Halls Corporation, they broke away from the mold and instated departments and boundaries between them. Their cybernetics division wouldn’t be addressing any clients looking to purchase a bio-coprocessor chip and vice versa.

It was a strange idea to the employees as that would often leave them just staring at a customer, who they couldn’t help. They would have to wait for the employee in the relevant section to be available.

“If you ask me, this whole company is strange. There are a lot of benefits for no reason. It makes me uneasy about the future,” Grace muttered.

“Well, it’s just how it is. Companies rise and fall. We just keep our heads down and do our job.”

“Right.”

The conversation was cut short as they both noticed their first proper customer entering the store. Several people who visited during the opening ceremony bought a few things as a gesture, but this marked the first walk-in customer.

Contrary to the type of clientele they were expecting, their customer was a man dressed not in corporate suits, but in tactical combat gear. His equipment had no markings either, which was typical of corporate security personnel. This, combined with the fact that the man was walking around, hugging a large sniper rifle, made the employees realize the man was most likely a mercenary.

However, none of them dared to look down on the man. Their company's main target market was exactly people like him. They were trained on how to address the various types of customers.

The greeter at the door swiftly welcomed the man and asked what the man was looking for. Grace's auditory implant was tuned up in time to hear the man state he wanted to just look around.

Following their training, the employees all stood straight behind their counters and stared straight ahead with a smile. They were forbidden from staring at the customer, as it may make them feel uncomfortable.

The client gave no hints of whether he noticed it or not. He simply went around in a circle, carefully scrutinizing every product the store offered. He breezed past various sections and only slowed down when he reached the vehicle section.

From her studies, Grace immediately knew all about the products there. The man could be seen scrolling through the terminal, examining the holographic projection of each model. The vehicle catalog currently only consisted of a Wraith-C all-terrain vehicle, Donkey-M transport vehicle, and Adventure-W dune buggy leisure vehicle.

Each of these products was newly introduced, so Grace was confident she knew just as much about it as the employee in charge of that section. She was eager to showcase her knowledge and help the customers, but she had to wait.

The man took his time asking questions and only arrived at Grace's station as his last stop.

"Welcome, sir. Please let me know if there is anything particular you would like to see."

The man nodded and took a few moments browsing the products inside the glass counters and scrolling through the terminal.

"Do you have any recommendations for someone in my profession?"

"Just to confirm, sir. You are in the mercenary profession. Is that correct?"

“What does it look to you?”

“In that case, let me recommend the Talos Type CC cyberarm of our company. For someone who likes to wield a precision rifle like yourself, it’ll compliment you well. It is no surprise that it will come with the ability to stabilize your aim and connect with your optics to highlight the estimated trajectory of your shots. In addition to that, the Talos model can deploy shield plates around you to provide cover while you’re stationary.”

The projection of the cybernetic floated around between the two of them. It transformed as Grace did her pitch, showcasing its abilities. She then went on to elaborate on the various specifications of the cyberarm and how durable it was.

Throughout her pitch, the man nodded along, but showed no other outward emotions. When she was done, he thanked her with a nod before taking his leave.

None of the employees minded the interaction too much. It was a good warmup to start their day. It would be foolish for them to believe every customer who walks into their store would be buying something.

Their day was only starting.

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After completing the opening ceremony for our new store, I quickly headed over to another new facility we had secretly constructed. In the interest of secrecy and saving resources, we had opted to make use of one of our larger stores that our milkshake brand, The Milkshake Halls, occupied.

We converted the ample storage space into a training center for our new security hires.

For that part, there was a lot of contention during the screening process. There were voices that both supported and against hiring from the common riff-raff without a corporate background. We had suffered one incident due to hiring from the public stock, but it was hard to cease hiring them due to the background of our executive team, including myself.

It ended up with a compromise that involved doing a more thorough investigation of the background of our hires. We needed to be sure they had no motivation to go against us, which meant we required them to have their families moved into our complex with them. Our official headquarters was becoming more and more like its own village.

“Thorne, how is the latest batch of recruits?” I asked as we entered a room with a balcony overlooking the training area.

It was just a bunch of capsules similar to the ones we had used for VR gaming, but this one wasn’t hooked up to any games. Instead, they were hooked up to devices that interacted with their SAID to give it the hypnopedia function. Of course, it employed our homemade cassettes.

The hard part of creating one for the security personnel was in the contents. It was extremely difficult to compile something that worked in most situations while not having characteristics for opponents to exploit.

Otherwise, if we taught each of them to check their corners in a specific way, the opposing factions who uncovered this could use it against our personnel. It was important not to instill any bad habits.

“We’ve been field-testing them with wasteland missions and mercenary work. Their starting point is decent, but still need further tempering before they are up to standard.”

“But they require much less time to reach that standard, correct?”

“Right. It’s hard to put a number to it as everyone is different, but I’d say a few weeks here shaved off a year or so.”

“Understood. Those are results to be proud of, but continue to experiment with the curriculum. We can always improve. Just make sure they get adequate replenishments.”

One thing Lanus learned from our continuous studies into the cassettes was that the learning process consumed a lot of energy. The brain demanded a lot more in order to function effectively. Thankfully, we were right inside our milkshake store. We had more than enough calories to go around.

With the final inspection of the day complete, I made my return to my cozy base under the megabuilding known as The Burrow. My body double would return to our official headquarters in my stead.

As soon as I returned to my workshop, I went onto my terminal and checked off another item on the list.

It had been many months since my return from space. There was a lot I wanted to get done, but it was inevitable that I had to start with reinforcing my foundations. I had allies and business partners to answer to. I couldn’t leave everything and focus on new projects after being away for so long.

That was why I tried to get all these tasks out of the way while my other projects took a back seat. I was still able to complete the commercial version of the cyberarm that was part of the set with the Hermes cyber legs. The task of completing the rest of the set awaited me.

Other than that, it was time to start upgrading our power armors and make headways into the software market. It would be our financial key that would fuel our upcoming expansions.