

Chapter 154: Hermes

I saw a notification for experience points off from the corner of my vision and I quickly pulled up my status to confirm.

Status	
Level:	25
EXP:	1720/2500
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

Yep, I'm not mistaken. Where did it come from?

I quickly glanced over at the vital readings of my test subjects and, as I suspected, one of the subjects had passed away.

They were all still strapped into their seat as I had just returned to the workshop, so I ran over to the subject in question.

“Lanus, what happened? You were monitoring them closely this entire time, correct?”

“Affirmative. Subject 04 was already showing adverse reactions during the first round of tests. Supplement. They were recovering steadily once the hypnopedia process was ceased, but it seems like they couldn’t recover during the new round of testing.”

There were so many things going through my mind at once.

First, the potential causes of this fatality and the dangers of what I was dealing with.

Then the implication that their death somehow still gave me experience points despite having no direct contact with them for hours. It was advantageous for me that I would still get the experience points, but I still preferred to rely on the safer and more efficient solution of wasteland hunting.

“Let me call the medical team to take them away if we’re finished here. It seems like we’ll need more test subjects on a rotation to allow them ample recovery time.”

“Concurred. I recommend having a minimum of six rotations, each consisting of at least twelve subjects.”

“I’ll see what we can do. It might take a few days...”

The next day, I requested our elite teams to carry out a new mission. Personally going to invite new test subjects didn’t really net me anything, so I delegated the task while I focused on things only I could do.

I had to oversee the experiments with Lanus and also work on the cybernetics from the feedback I got during our initial tests. It wasn’t easy trying to add a competitive edge to my product.

I had intended it as part of a set without going full-body replacement. The strength I mainly added to it relied on functioning in tandem with the other part of the set. By itself, it wouldn’t differentiate itself from the market that much. That was why at the start of the project, I paid a good sum to a headhunting company to find me several mechanical engineering specialists.

My cybernetic knowledge was mainly related to integrating electronics with the human body. It wasn’t enough on its own and required other skill sets to imbue it with a competitive advantage.

I had done with the Shade with my stealth technology. I wasn’t going to start leveling a new disciple of science when mechanical engineering wasn’t the most hard-to-find subject around. There were plenty of experts around that other corporations wouldn’t sweat losing.

Combined with my electrical engineering and software knowledge, we should be able to produce something much better with our combined strengths.

For better or worse, the headhunting company only got back to me once I had completed the first prototype.

“Ms. Stella, I’m happy to see that you’ve decided to give us a chance, but I’m wondering what made you decide to do so when you’re already employed by a big company like Zenitech?”

“...Mr. Halls, I’m sure you understand that relationships in a larger corporation can get...complicated. Competition within the company was already fierce, but as someone who hadn’t studied in their schools, it had become unbearable.”

“Oh, where did you go to school then?”

“I went to Ivory-U, a school under the management of Ivory Corporation.”

A quick search netted me the result that told the story in itself. Ivory Corp specialized in the academic field and was generally not affiliated with any other corporations. They allowed corpo families to attain the required education without binding themselves to any one organization.

I remembered back on what one of my employees, Drew, had previously explained to me. Some corpo families were smart in that they didn’t put all their eggs in one basket. It was common for them to have family members all in different corporations that could even be in opposing factions.

After asking several more targeted questions about Stella’s motivations and knowledge, I quickly offered her the position.

“You can start as you finish our onboarding, which consists of a short seminar and a medical checkup.”

“Thank you, sir. I can start today.”

“I’m glad you’re so enthusiastic, but you should move in first. Our employees are required to live in our dorms.”

“No problem. I’ll be ready by the end of the day.”

Wow, she sure was a go-getter.

It didn’t take long to finish the few interviews I had scheduled, and I successfully hired three new researchers for our team.

I left a memo and instructions on what they need to work on for their first day tomorrow and went off to my next appointment.

“Luford, it is so good to see you. I hope you are doing well?” I greeted the projection of my new friend with the best smile I could muster.

“...Yes...business has been going smoothly.”

“Perfect! Are you sure there isn’t anything we need to take a look at? Or maybe a new product idea?”

“No, we’re already working at capacity. If you want to do more...we’ll need a few months to expand.”

“That’s fine. I’ve seen the financials, no need to rush it when everything is going well. Anyway, there was another reason why I scheduled this appointment today. Does your company’s knowledge database have any advanced academic knowledge you’re willing to share or trade?” I scratched my cheeks as I asked.

I wasn’t sure if they did have such a thing, but it was worth a shot. A database with comprehensive knowledge was something I’d have to work on as our cassettes were taking shape. We needed a proper repository of knowledge for the contents of the cassettes themselves.

“I’ll have to check to be sure what I can or cannot share, but that shouldn’t be a problem. Was there anything specific you were looking for?”

“Do you think you can share everything that you can with me? I don’t need access to all your proprietary stuff, but I’d appreciate it if you could share all the basic scientific knowledge you have.”

Yes! So they did have something. It’s so much better to use theirs as a base to build upon than to start from scratch.

“...Understood. I’ll get in touch with you soon.”

Once our call ended, I sat there as I brainstormed other methods to acquire more knowledge. I pulled up the list of publicly known cassettes SocialCorp sold, but none of them satisfied me. It was apparent they only kept much of the advanced topics to themselves. If it was compared to what the system offered, they only went up to approximately three to five points worth of knowledge.

However, my eyes lit up when it landed on several other cassettes that offered knowledge in something other than the academic fields.

They had basic weapon-handling cassettes, too. Extrapolating that, it should mean it was possible to have knowledge related to handling aircraft, vehicles, naval, power armor, and other specialized equipment too. Many of these fields took years to train qualified professionals, all of which could be shortened if I had a cassette for it.

How did they record the contents of those cassettes in the first place? It isn't like they could type it into their terminals...

As I mulled over the issue, Claire walked into my office.

“Here are the financials for this month. We have a little more leeway now that Sensorial has launched more products with us, but the cost of your big project still weighs heavily on our books.”

“Thanks...” I skimmed over the important bits while I shelved my thoughts. “Cost of training has shot up?”

“You can ask Thorne for that one, but we're basically expanding big time again. Your new fancy bird in the air will need more pilots, and he's been getting some of the elite teams ready for your power armor.”

Right, that is the next priority. I have to finish up with what's on my plate as quickly as I can.

“So...Weird questions, but how would you go about recording how to specific skills like shooting a gun or driving a car?”

“Hmm? Why are you asking?”

“I was wondering how they did it for the cassettes.”

“Oh, don't they just record a walkthrough of it like a training video of someone's experience? It's how they do the tutorials in VR games. They really work! Nothing beats first-hand experiences, but second-hand experiences come pretty close.”

“I see...”

As convincing as Claire was, I think I should just buy one of those cassettes to see for myself.

Time flew by fast, especially when you were as busy as me.

With the addition of the new mechanical engineering specialists, we quickly optimized the cybernetic leg. It was previously dubbed the prototype XJ4, but I came up with a proper name for it called Hermes.

We went all out with it and since it was meant for internal use; the budget was up to me. The specific variant made for the volleyball team was optimized for jumping and short distance abrupt movements while the one for our security was still under development.

The entire project had made me watch many of their practice sessions and I ended up coming along for the actual tournament as well.

It was only the preliminaries, but I could already see numerous teams from various corporations gathering in one of the big stadiums.

A corporate executive from SocialCorp organized the event, so it was to be expected, but it was still surprising to see the scale of it when it was only the preliminaries. The gymnasium appeared like what I would see at a national competition. It helped that every team dressed the part.

Thorne and I followed along with the team to our assigned court. While they talked about strategy, I examined the surrounding competitors.

A large majority of them had cybernetics for all four limbs. The rules only allowed the use of two, but if you had more, you could still participate by using the tournament-provided limiters.

From the cyberware people used and their company logo, I could tell the participants heavily leaned toward cybernetic companies.

There was still a decent amount of corporations in different fields, as everyone tried to butter up to a SocialCorp executive.

Having seen enough, I glanced over at the list of all the participating teams once more. I grinned at the fact that all of them were from corporations below C-Class. Joey didn't tell me if my team needed to win or not to catch the executive's attention, but my chances were definitely higher, the lower the quality of my opponents.

After spending so much time and resources on this, if it doesn't work out, I would be quite sad. It wouldn't be a devastating setback, but I'd rather take part in the social circle among the powerful corporations sooner than later.

Soon, the tournament got on its way, and a gigantic projection of a man drew everyone's attention. The man was wearing a lab coat and had a bowl cut. He was quite lanky, and he was wearing glasses for some reason. However, the most distinct feature about him was the design of his glasses, which resembled lollipops.

"I'll get straight to the point. I would like to see some good volleyball. I won't tolerate any cheaters, so you have been warned. Let me see your friendship, passion, and teamwork overflow while you overcome your opponents!"

I had heard this guy had started this tournament on a whim after reading a manga found in the dungeons. I had tempered my expectations of what he was like, but this...

I have no idea what to say about him...