

Incentive

Webster Leone, 2019

Content Warning: injury, blood

Concern

Webster double checked the debug information fed to her rose colored HUD glasses from the equipment in the middle of the room. Supported and protected on either side by sturdy vertical steel beams was an electromechanical exoskeleton, designed to help people paralyzed from the neck down to regain mobility.

She was here "on loan" to the small company developing the exosuit to ensure the very first clinical trial run went smoothly. The workers didn't really know where she was from, just that through some chain of companies and contracts they acquired talent they would never have been able to get on their own, even if temporarily.

In truth, the white tiger was from the Korps, who were controlling the whole project. In and of itself it could actually be considered a rather useless project, as they had far better ways to deal with such injuries. Really, it was just another feign, supporting companies that the Korps knew could be useful in the future and down-playing their level of sophistication to the world at large once someone inevitably traced the connections back to them.

The main benefit for Webster was getting some expertise working with systems outside her wheelhouse, although she perhaps had more of those than she'd like. But another perk was getting out of the labs and traveling a bit. While the complex she lived at was extensive and provided a ton of amenities to keep one healthy and happy, it still could grow repetitive.

The lead of the project turned away from the suit and towards the doors to the large lab space as they opened. It was a stark white room with bright lighting. A row of work benches lined the wall to his right and a row of server racks stood a few feet out from the wall to his left. "Ah, welcome!" A young man in an electric wheelchair entered, two people following behind, both wearing vests emblazoned with the company's logo.

"So where is it?" the man in the wheelchair laughed, a bit short of breath. The lead smiled to the subject and stepped to the side.

"I doubt I have to tell you how excited we are for this trial, as I'm sure you're quite enthused yourself!"

"Hah, I suppose so." The young man rolled up to the suit, coming in from the side opposite the lead. It was blocky, really rather industrial looking all things considered. A rumble shook the

building, interrupting his train of thought. He sighed, a slight frown forming. The two that followed him in took leave to investigate, not wanting the test interrupted.

"Darn those construction vehicles... Oh, is everything okay?" He gritted, trying to fake a smile as he noticed the subject's expression.

Reversing his chair, the man failed to shrug and sighed again. "Just... y'don't really get the impact of what's happening until you're *really here*." It was obvious he had reluctance on the whole thing now that the concept was made physical.

The lead was took a sharp breath, annoyed that the whole project might be in so far as become *delayed*. What horror the thought of shifted timelines brought to him, but he smiled and nodded. In reality it affected nothing of importance, but *he* didn't know that and therefore did the best thing he could think of: he approached Webster and quietly asked her to *do* something about... *that*.

She smiled softly and sighed, never really the one to interact with a customer, client, or other outside person, but willing to give it a shot. The tiger walked over, the rubber heels of her boots making soft thuds as she approached the man. Placing herself between him and the suit, Webster stuck her hands in the pockets of her hoodie. "Hey, it's okay. We're not going to make you do anything you're uncomfortable with. It's a pretty big deal, and there're other options, including some really neat stuff just on the horizon." She leaned in, noticing a frown. "But hey, if you change your mind, we'll make sure yours has racing stripes on it." She winked and stood back up as he laughed.

"And a spoiler!"

They laughed together, and she let out an amused sigh. A moment passed, the silence only punctuated by the dull roar of dozens of fans in the racks near them. She turned her head to look towards them, various indicator lights blinking through the mesh of the rack doors.

Hindsight

Pain. Imbalance. Fire alarms. Webster's headset yelling dozens of notifications at her. She winced. Blurred vision. She focused. The wall of lab benches was upside down. And a large part of it missing. No, she was upside down. A large part of the wall was *still* missing though. Hm. What was on the other side of that wall? Was that the welding shop? Her RCG HUD confirmed it. Okay, so welding supplies probably donated. How? Oh, sound, right, she can hear. And she hears yelling. Fighting? Her RCGs. She hears various warning sounds, and a calm feminine voice repeating: "Seek medical attention."

Oh... oh. Okay. Can't move. Correction: couldn't move most of her body. She tumbled onto the floor, the server racks towering over head, all rather dusty and the one directly above her rather

crumpled in. She propped herself up on her one working arm and looked around. Oh, that wasn't good. The volunteer for the trial was upside down with the wheelchair pinning him with his neck at an angle that, per her RCG's diagnosis, would leave him suffocated. Oh, her RCGs!

She played back the recording of everything after she looked over to the computers. *Oh*. That was a big explosion. And based on elapsed time, he was most certainly dead. She looked over at the suit, still upright between its support columns. She pushed and pulled herself along the smooth PVC tiles, looking for the project lead. She didn't have to go far. His head was pancaked between a cinder block and one of the columns, like someone threw a raspberry pie at it.

Her RCG started to get more insistent. "*Webster*. Seek medical attention *immediately*." It flashed her vital signs over her vision. Her heart started pounding. Or was her feeling just returning. Probably the latter. Oh, hey, panic, about time you got here. She looked about the room, not seeing much. Well, the stand-by medical team should be here in... Webster checked the time. Oh. She thought that a lot. Anyway, oh. Oh? Oh right, they should have been here two minutes ago. *Fuck*.

She fell onto her back. Her one good arm was hurting. Maybe it wasn't so good. She saw the overhead crane, used to erect the suit's support structure, among many other things from past projects she wasn't privy to. She couldn't reach the controls, but, well, everything is network connected these days, yeah? She had her RCG contact emergency services while she backdoored her way through miraculously working network equipment to the local network, to the control and monitoring panel, to the crane to the crane's controls. Warning lights flickered on as it lurched into motion.

Ha-hah! She thought. *Bitch*. She also thought. Through *thought alone*, ignoring all the computer equipment involved, including her RCG, she got it to move into position above her and lower its clasp-hook down to just above her head. The tiger grabbed it tight and slowly lifted up, moving towards the suit. She adjusted again and again, taking it slower than perhaps she should have with the warning her RCG was stating: "*Warning: death imminent*."

Yeah that's hardly the worst that could happen at this point.

She lowered herself, gently spinning back and forth on the freely rotating hook until her butt made contact with a sort-of-seat made out of the lap of the unit. Then she dragged herself backwards some, trying to line up her neck with the main control electrodes of the unit. Using the debug feed she activated the suit to get precise location data and gingerly had its shoulder clasps grab onto her. With a quick servo whine, hundreds of tiny gold needles pierced her neck, a partial collar folding around to pull her into it, causing her to grimace. Suddenly the machine started adjusting to her body and she let go as she was encapsulated by it.

The now cybernetics-meshed-tiger stood up, tearing loose wiring that connected her to the servers, and darted out the doors haphazardly. Her RCG lead her to where the medical team

should have been, finding the area empty apart from singed furniture and running fire sprinklers. She ripped cabinet doors off their hinges and grabbed everything her headset told her to take, making use of small compartments on the exosuit that equated to pockets one might normally have on their clothing. The mechanical hands were large, so some things she got just by dumping drawers into them. She moved to a dry area and got to work.

Help

Webster overrode the safeties on the suit and let half of herself dangle free to get at her injuries. Using her other half along with the empty suit arm, she performed emergency medical care on herself. According to her RCG, blood loss was slowly killing her. She wasn't sure whether internal or external bleeding would kill her, but she figured she'd start with the external so at least the blood would stay inside her. That was simple enough, just compression, gauze, and tape. She might need stitches but that would have to come later. At least the thick medical tape was easy enough to use with the bulky mechanical hands.

The focus now was on her left back-side. The impact with the server rack apparently damaged an artery and was filling the surrounding body cavity with blood. *Fuck. I need that blood.* She froze for a moment, realizing she didn't have the experience to handle this. But she knew how to get ahold of someone who did, and called out on the Korps RCG network for help. An answer came in the form of a text message: *Don't worry, we got you.* Slowly her sense of touch faded away, leaving her with a staticy feeling similar to being numb and buzzed. The robot suit moved on it's own; her body along with it.

It was an ethereal feeling, not being in control of the suit. In such a short time her brain had gotten used to its feedback, but now it and even more so the entirety of her body were separate, like she had taken a back seat to someone else. Mentally she felt the actions going through her body, and the reasons why they were taken. She was in a way learning by doing, even though it was someone else actually doing it.

Eventually the amalgamation of her and this anonymous person stopped the bleeding and got her stapled back up. Feeling returned to her body, at least what was there prior to the surgery. As the warmth subsided it felt as if she was brushing past the other person to take back the commander's seat. She wanted to say thank you and hug them, she was so relieved. Before she could figure out how to even send a message back one popped up on her display: *It's okay. Now go kick some ass!*

Beeping alerted her to an incoming hostile. From the look of things it was a superhero. *Ah*, she thought, *that's what they meant.* She swung around, the suit catching her body and closing back around it, and she took a fighting stance, grinning through the pain. *Time to return the favor.*