

Chapter 70: Outing

I reviewed the file Claire sent me as she and Lucy talked quietly in the background.

Their idea of an intelligence agency wasn't what you'd see in movies with the operatives and thrilling espionage, but much more practical which I favored. They planned to create a mobile app that was tentatively a game and targeted to the general public. In doing so, they would gain access to thousands of people's messages and mine data from them.

I'm sure the powerful corporations could already do this by simply brute forcing into the networks or bribing the telecommunication companies. Neither of those options was viable to us, as we were too small.

"Did you finish going over it?" Claire asked as soon as I turned off the display on my optics.

"Yes, it's a pretty good plan, coming from you."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Nothing. Anyway, a few things. Your plan entirely relies on the fact that people will use our app in droves. How are you going to ensure that?"

"Make the best app we can, at low prices."

"Okay, let's say you do. But in the first place, do you even know the size of your target market, which are the people who often play games?"

"A lot? Definitely enough for our needs to collect information."

"Maybe, but I think we should go into something with a bigger market. How about in communications?"

"Communications? There's like a million different ones already."

"Yeah, but they're all costly to use. The corporations are squeezing as much as they can from the populace while corpos use their own internal solutions like us. We should make a free...no, low-price messaging app."

If we did free, it would only intensify the general public's suspicions of the goal of the corporation. If we lowered the price instead, they may think it's simply a price war between corps.

"You're going to need to invest quite a bit to set up the server infrastructure."

"There's no time like now to get started. Call Leo and Lana, we'll want their input."

We ended up deciding to finish the project to build our company dorms first before we constructed a server for our app idea.

In the meantime, I began developing the basic foundation for the app with Claire, while also working on the electric vehicles.

I was only able to spare time on both projects now thanks to all the new hires we had at our new R&D department. Nothing felt better than handing off all the tedious work and calculations to others, allowing me to focus on only the important bits.

We were so close to getting it the way I wanted, but a few bottlenecks inevitably appeared during development for both projects. Even if we completed them, we wouldn't be able to proceed without the server room for the app and expanding our salvage operation to acquire materials for the vehicles.

That's why I decided to fly off to NLA once more. While I would oversee the expansion project, the main objective of the trip was to level up in the wastelands.

I had learned my lesson. Targeting others, regardless if they were lowlives or not, would entice retaliation. They weren't well equipped or very smart about it, but they'll find a way, and it would be annoying to deal with. My businesses were going on track and any potential disruption would delay us.

That was why I decided to hunt the mindless beasts of the wasteland instead. For that purpose, I only brought a small team of elites with me, which only consisted of Thorne and two new recruits who had been performing well.

Vin and the new administrative manager of NLA greeted us at the airport.

"Welcome back again. It's been over a month, but it just felt like yesterday that you left," Vin said.

"Yeah, but we'll be mostly staying in the wasteland this time. Probably bring a few extra things with us to leave in the outpost, and only come back out every few days to a week.

"...You sure you can last so long out there without access to showers and good food?"

"...Sure."

That night, I took us out to the best restaurant that had last-minute availability and pigged out.

"So this is the wasteland..." I heard the guard driving, mutter.

"Peng has never seen such a massive storm before. Peng wants to go explore."

“Peng, I told you to shut up unless we were talked to. Sorry boss, he’s a little awkward.”

“Don’t worry about it. It’ll be boring for us all without having some conversation. Isn’t that right, Thorne?”

“Yeah, traveling in the wasteland is a boring experience. The scenery is repetitive, and the only thing to look at is the navigation screens, lest we go off course.”

“That’s why I picked a ruin that wasn’t that far from our outpost and also had quite a few mutants to entertain ourselves with.”

“I’m not sure I share the same view on fighting mutants as you, boss...”

“It’s normal to be nervous doing something you’re not familiar with. You’ll get used to it during this trip.”

Slightly more than thirty minutes of driving away from our outpost, we soon arrived at the ruin in question. We had scouted out the area before when we were looking for mutants for ‘Desire Corp’ to capture.

This was an older area that had been picked clean already, so few people frequented the area.

We found a place to park in the ruins and set up the car’s turret to automatically defend this location. It was easy to rig together, as it was simply the same working principle as the turrets that defended our clinic. The two guards, Peng and Andrew, accompanied Thorne and me into one of the derelict skyscrapers.

It was literally empty inside, but the people of old seemed to like their underground facilities because this one apparently connected to the underground network that covered the majority of this deserted town.

Unlike the previous ones I’ve been to, this one was a bit icky, though. Water leaked into the underground paths that filled it with puddles every few meters.

We didn’t even make two steps before something burst out of the water toward us. Thorne’s figure blurred, and the next thing we saw was him pinning a crocodile-like mutant down.

The mutant had longer limbs which made it stand tall, at the perfect height to take a bite at our throats. It had dangerous-looking claws as well as a spiked tail. It thrashed about, trying to break free, only to be shoved violently into the ground.

I pulled out my railgun and ended its struggles.

+10 EXP

We continued forward, much more cautious of the murky puddles than before.

While the three of us who weren't cyborgs that possessed lightning-fast reactions and speed, Peng, with his shield, was able to halt any attacking mutants for us to finish off.

"Yuck, are we looking for something down here, boss?" The guard, Andrew, asked as he brushed off the mutant bloodstains on his clothes.

"Think of this as a research trip. We find mutants, kill them, and scan them."

I had to put on a show of doing something, as we were only here to kill mutants.

"Peng is hungry," the large man said as he stared at the corpses of the crocodiles.

"Peng, shut up. I don't think those are even edible...right?"

"Yeah, unless you put them through a protein extractor."

"There you have it, Peng," He shrugged.

We continued our hunt and went further into the basement maze. We moved slowly, so our optics had a chance to scan our surroundings.

"There's like half a dozen in there," I pointed toward the corner that was likely a former retail store of some kind.

The four of us aimed our weapons at the threat and fired at them before they could spring their ambush on us.

+10 EXP

+10 EXP

+10 EXP

+10 EXP

I should've done this more often. It was a pain to head out into the wasteland, but it was a way more suitable place to grind experience points.

Just as we began moving again, the earth suddenly shook.

"Earthquake! Don't get split up. Everyone, stay close!"

The rumble of the ground slowly intensified as we all held onto the walls to keep our balance. As it grew stronger, we decided to lie prone on the ground, shoulder to shoulder.

It shook for a full minute before it finally subsided. We stayed on the ground for a little longer, mindful of any aftershocks.

After a while, we stood back up and dusted ourselves off.

“Rollo, look!”

I turn toward where Thorne was pointing, to find the store where we finished off the mutants was now gone. Gone as in the entire floor of the store gave out, and only a hole in the ground remained.

I got a closer look at what was down there, but I couldn't see the bottom of it.

“This goes really deep. We should get out of here before the ground beneath us crumbles too.”

We regrouped by our car and ventured only on the ground level instead for the remainder of our outing.

Once sunset drew near, we returned to our wasteland outpost.

We pulled up to the spacious garage that had dozens of Vanguards parked inside. There was an open area off to the side where vehicles were being worked on.

The outpost had come a long way from when it was just a hole in the cliff. We used the extra scrap metal for construction materials and created an entire facility that could hold a hundred people for a long time. There weren't that many people here, though. Only about two dozen that rotated their use of the base.

My other job while I was here was to oversee the expansion. That's why when we returned, I quickly went to see the base commander after cleaning myself up.

It sucks I can't shower, but at least I can wipe myself off with a wet towel.

“How is it going, Anders?”

“Sir, we are currently recruiting personnel and training them in rotation. The only issue we're having is the vehicles. We're spending more time than expected on maintenance, and we need more trucks if we want to significantly increase our capacity.”

“Okay, I'll let procurement know. The sooner we get this started, the sooner we should be able to produce our own vehicles and parts.”

“...Sir, regarding that... It'll be difficult to upkeep a high level of materials that fit the quality we're looking for. It's not as simple as just getting more people and trucks to ship out more materials. The method of scavenging we've been using won't be able to provide enough quantity, consistently.”

“Did you have a suggestion?”

“We follow what other corporations do, we find ores to mine or take it from someone else.”

“You want us to attack another corp for their mine? I don’t think we can handle the heat that comes along with it.”

“Well, it’s either that or we find a mine...It’ll take some expensive prospecting equipment to work in the wasteland. Even then, we’ll need a lot of time and luck to find one, though.”

“I see, thank you, Anders. I’ll think about it. You continue on with your work.”

Now then, how am I going to get us an entire mine?