

Chapter 31: Desert Encounter

Just as I finished changing and was ready for another day, the door to my room suddenly swung open.

“Claire! The harvesters are on the move again!”

“Are they outside?!” I asked in a panic, scrambling for my gun and ammo.

“What? No, they’ve been lurking around recently and now they have attacked our patients.”

I found the gun in the holster still attached to my outfit yesterday. I transferred it over, unholstered the gun, and threw it as hard as I could at Thorne.

“Then don’t rush in here like it’s an imminent emergency. Have some delicacy, would you?”

“Sorry,” Thorne rubbed his forehead. “I panicked for a moment and wanted you to know as soon as possible...Don’t give me that look, I’m okay, I’ll keep it cool.”

“Thorne...” I took a deep breath, “Just because you’re technically in charge of security now doesn’t mean you have to do everything. Did you talk to the other guys yet? You know, the one we hired for security?”

“No...” Right after he said that his figure retreated from my doorway.

I double-checked if I had everything again and picked up my gun lying on the ground as I headed out to start a new day.

After a quick breakfast, I found Thorne and the security team all in the control room together.

“We need to widen the area we’re monitoring. We can’t have our clients being attacked left and right, team——”

Not wanting to disturb them, I retreated to my home office I set up upstairs where there was still a free room. We had a new receptionist, so I spent the majority of my time learning more about how to install cybernetics and cyber security.

I opened the terminal Rollo had bought for me and started reviewing the camera footage we had on our server. We definitely didn’t have that great of a coverage outside of the clinic, so we didn’t have a recording of the attack.

Us not having footage didn’t mean there was no footage at all, though. I started breaching through the cameras around the block that I had previously played around with, so I knew which ones I could gain access to.

The harvesters were far from professional groups, and the various captured footage had their shadows everywhere. It took a while to sift through the pure number of recordings, but after an hour or so of digging around, I got the scene I wanted.

Thorne couldn't be found in the clinic, so I called him, "Claire, what is it?"

"Sending you some footage I found. Check it out."

"Okay...I'll spread the guy's image around. It'll make it easier to search, thanks."

"No, I didn't find the footage for that. Did you watch the whole thing? It shows the vehicle they ran way in too."

"Yeah, but it's some getaway car they lifted off the streets right?"

"Yes, but I traced it back to the ECPD database on the report for the stolen vehicle and found the security footage when they stole that car as well, which led to another vehicle they used for the car theft."

"You can just do that?"

"Well, we're not dealing with humanity's brightest here. They at least removed the plates from their car, but following them around on the cameras, I found a fast food place they visit every day. Sending you the location now, go check it out, and turn on your body cam."

"Yes, ma'am."

A moment later, my terminal received the connection to Thorne's body cam, allowing me to watch. He contacted the rest of the security team and made their way to the location I sent.

Upon coming close to the location, the cars split off and went around the area. I linked the feed to my optics as I went about studying cybernetics and observed the installation process at the clinic.

By the time the last scheduled surgery for the day commenced, Thorne's voice drew my attention.

"All units, we have spotted the target vehicle. It is entering the drive-through now."

Their entire team stayed a comfortable distance away and started tailing them. They circled around the block a few times so they had to switch out the car following them. Then they moved to the downtown commercial area where I would've never been able to access their security footage without alerting corporations.

By the time the last client left the clinic and we were preparing to close, Thorne's team finally came to a stop as the vehicle parked at the edge of the island, by the ocean.

They followed the men into a small harbor where the footage went dark as Thorne and his team turned on their active camouflage.

When the camera resumed, they were already in the interior of the boat with several bodies sprawled around.

Everything okay over there? I texted over to avoid distracting him too much.

Yeah, it's clear, we're just investigating now. This isn't their headquarters, but there should be blues here. I'll plug you in, in a moment, so you can see if you can find anything from their systems.

True to his words, I soon received a new connection a moment later.

I guess I won't be sleeping anytime soon tonight.

"Everyone, check your weapons. We have guests."

Right after Vin called out in our comms, our small convoy slightly shifted directions to stay away from the approaching vehicles.

"They don't seem to be chasing us, but there's continuous gunfire...I think there are two separate parties fighting," Vin noted from the driver's seat as he continued to study the information our detection equipment provided.

"So we've just stumbled upon their fight?" I asked.

"Hopefully..." His gaze continued to be glued to the terminal.

A tense few minutes passed, but the screen showed that the vehicles continued on their heading without change.

"We're in the clear! Detour a little further before we head to our destination." Everyone relaxed at Vin's words.

We took a long detour and changed directions several times before we arrived at the location we selected to build our outpost. It was at the foot of a cliff that stood tall even against the unrelenting sandstorm.

Our plan was simple. We would simply be using the fastest and cheapest method, which meant we brought a specialized excavator and tunneling equipment that we rented.

The construction specialists quickly got to work deploying their sensors on the cliff and rapidly adjusted the blueprint to account for the terrain. The excavating was much faster than I expected. Within a few hours, a spacious lobby area was dug out, enough for us to unload what we brought.

“How long will the construction take?” I asked the specialist when was slightly less busy.

“Sir, it’ll take a few weeks in total at the very least, but the residential units should be ready in a week once we finish setting up power, water, and ventilation,” He noted as he reviewed his handheld terminal.

With the cargo emptied, we split off into two teams. One remained here with the construction crew while the other one prepared to head out into the ruins for salvage.

Following the salvage team, we repeated the trip to the ruins. The difference this time was we had to find a spot to park the trucks, so we drove further into the ruins. We soon spotted a clearing between the buildings that would work.

As we pulled up to the spot, a low howl roared out. Followed by it were dozens of wolves, as tall as a person, rushing out from behind the surrounding buildings.

“Contact! Fire at will!”

Without needing my input, the turrets from the Vanguard roared to life and filled the area with the sound of gunfire. The larger caliber bullets ripped into the wolves. The wolves soon recognized the great threat we posed to them, their disadvantageous position, or both, but they collectively made the decision to retreat just as fast as they came.

“You two, man the turrets and defend the cars. The rest of us will head into that building over there. Let us know through the comms if you hear anything,” Vin barked out as we exited the vehicle.

We headed straight into the large office building nearby. The windows were all shattered, but it was in decent condition.

The moment the leading man stepped into the stairway, a figure leaped out at him from the corner. He was instantly pinned to the ground, but he held his attacker back at the jaws with his metal arms as the mutant wolf tried to bite down on him.

We quickly fired into the immobilized wolf, “Be alert for more!” Vin rushed into the stairwell, guns pointed up the flight of stairs.

<i>+10 EXP</i>

I offered the man a hand, “Are you all right?”

“Yes, I’m fine, sir,” He answered as he hopped to his feet.

The rest of the trip was uneventful as we successfully loaded the truck with salvage and the wolves seemed to have learned to keep away from us.

We headed back to the construction site and by the time we got back; it was almost time for us to return to the city. We planned to rotate a team that would stay here while the rest of us returned to bring back our loot and bring in more materials for the construction efforts on the next run.

On our way out of the wasteland towards the border, our sensors pinged several vehicles coming at us from an angle again. There was gunfire coming from them as well this time.

Not this again...Are these the same ones we found before?

We repeated our previous decision and altered our trajectory to avoid the vehicles.

“Look! There’s one breaking off from their group and heading straight toward us!”

“Sir, they’re going to catch up to us soon. The trucks can’t keep up!” One of the drivers said over the comms.

“Head back to the ruins. The buildings there should interfere with their tracking systems. We’ll lose them there!” Vin, as a veteran, adeptly shouted out commands to the drivers as we sped away, but the vehicle continued to chase us down.

Not long after, the dilapidated concrete jungle came into view again. Vin commanded the team to go over some rough terrain, making it harder for our pursuer to take advantage of their faster vehicle.

“They’re onto us, we can’t lose them, sir!” The driver shouted back.

“I can see that. We need to find a good spot to ambush them...” Vin furrowed his brows.

“I’ll get off and disable their car, drive us somewhere they have to go slow!” I said as opened the rear doors.

“It’s too dangerous to go alone,” A firm hand rested on my shoulder.

“Don’t worry, Vin, I’ll make use of my active camouflage to get the jump on them or retreat if it fails. That’s why I should go as the only one with the implant to do so. Just rush in to back me up once I disabled their vehicle.”

He didn’t respond but feeling his grip loosen; I rolled out of the car once it was slow enough.

They then made a turn a short distance away, so I readied myself at the turn. It didn't take long before a large four-seater shaped like a dune buggy approached. They slowed down for the uneven terrain and I patiently waited as they closed the distance with my camouflage activated.

I waited until the car slowed down further as they went into the turn and shot my railgun at the wheels until my clip emptied. I repositioned and reloaded my gun then surveyed the aftermath of the vehicle. It was at a standstill in the middle of the road.

The two doors at the front violently swung open at the same time as two figures popped out with their firearms at the ready, aimed in the direction I had shot from.

They wore heavy-looking vests, so I edged closer for better accuracy.

After a few steps, I noticed one of the figures was a girl with long brown hair.

She looks awfully familiar...

I angled around to get a better look at her face.

"...Sarah?"