

# Chapter 192: Investigative Work

## Ralph - ???

In the busy city of Elevate City, there stood a lone man inside a narrow alleyway. He was leaning against the walls, admiring the graffiti artwork on the walls before him. Or at least, that was what any passerby would think.

While Ralph appeared to be one hundred percent baseline human, free from any augmentation, appearances could be deceiving. His eyes were a piece of high technology, and others wouldn't be able to tell even if he had something pulled up on it.

Even if one had the skills to hack into his optic and spy on what he was doing, they would simply see him watching porn. That was because the message Ralph was receiving was heavily encrypted, and only relevant personnel could understand it.

*Another surveillance gig. When will they finally recall me back to headquarters? I'm long overdue for a promotion. I've had it with fieldwork. Please let this be the last one.*

Ralph was only able to grumble to himself as there was no one to vent to. Even if there was someone, he didn't have long to do so.

That was because the message followed his department's protocol. It didn't have any details on it and only a location. He had to be there within the hour. Otherwise, the mission dossier would self-destruct, preventing the agent from doing their job. And that was not something Ralph wanted to happen.

He swiftly departed from the alleyway, back into the Neon District proper. The nightlights were shining brightly and loud music was being blasted from various establishments. The scene wouldn't be complete without its signature neon lights, making the street look like the inside of a club.

Ralph adeptly dodged the occasional drunk passerby and entered into one of the establishments. It had a long line, but the bouncer simply let him walk by without blinking an eye.

Strangely, none of the people in line complained either. No cloaking devices were used. The man's presence was just that thin, with no one bothering to take a second look at him.

Like that, Ralph made his way into the strip club. He glanced around for a specific target in mind, and when he found her, he beckoned her over. The two didn't say a single word to each other and went inside a private booth.

Like most of the other guests, the two didn't bother to employ the privacy screens and left the door transparent. The lady didn't seem to mind and led Ralph into a seat before she began

dancing and stripping. While her movements were mesmerizing, her eyes were hollow. If anyone paid close attention, they would definitely conclude she was out of it, but Ralph took no note of it.

There were people walking by every so often, so Ralph had to wait for the gaps where no one was around. Then he would use the cable from his wrist to plug into the girl on top of him. Her port was hidden beneath her long hair, so once he was connected, it would be hard for anyone to notice.

Instantly, a flood of random data flooded his SAID. His implant began to heat up as it worked hard to decode everything. Soon, he had the complete dossier downloaded.

*What in the world... A company that just became an E-Class corporation? Seriously? Is someone targeting me back at the head office, trying to push me to the sidelines with these missions?*

Despite his initial misgivings, Ralph continued to read on. It didn't take long for his expression to soften as he went over the details. He realized the corporation he had been sent to survey wasn't as simple as it appeared. That could be said for all corporations, but this case was on another scale.

It was so far from the norm that Ralph's employers decided to partner him up with another agent. This was usually only done in high-priority missions where they predicted their agents would have a high chance of being terminated without being able to report back. This way, one could keep their distance and report on the anomalies if their partner were to disappear.

Ralph didn't know to whether be happy or annoyed at being given a tough job. He took in a deep breath and went over to the main floor of the strip club to enjoy a drink. As a seasoned intel agent, being able to drink with strangers was a vital skill. It opened up a conversation where he could learn many tidbits of information.

By the time he left the establishment, it would be morning already. Resting wasn't something he needed to do every day, so he went straight to the cafe where he would rendezvous with his backup.

When he entered the coffee shop, he spotted a woman sitting discreetly in the corner already. They exchanged nods and Ralph took a seat next to her.

Like many of the other people around them, they soon began to converse about mundane subjects. However, that was only a ruse. Through their SAID, they were actually on a call together. Their company-provided cybernetics allowed their conversation to be entirely vocalized internally.

"You're Kriss, I presume?"

"Yes, and you're Ralph?"

“Yeah. Now that we got introductions out of the way, let’s talk work.”

“Straight to the point, aren’t you? They said to proceed cautiously. We don’t have to rush.”

“Doesn’t mean we should delay our homework. Care to share what you’ve gathered so far?”

In reality, both Kriss and Ralph were both smiling, having a pleasant conversation. Kriss took a sip from her cup before she continued.

“Not that much aside from what was included in the dossier and publicly accessible. The target splits his time evenly between Elevate City and NLA for this past year. When they do stay in NLA, they choose the worst part of it, too.”

Ralph furrowed a brow. The target’s specific movements weren’t something he had investigated yet.

“The lawless district?”

“No, worst. The wasteland.”

“That’s...concerning,” Ralph sighed. “My intel suggests they’ve been moving a lot of equipment around. The heavy-duty kind. This may mean they’re building or expanding some facility that we can’t lay eyes on. We’ll need to plan this thoroughly if we’re to find anything in the wasteland. Maybe place a tracker in their vehicles.”

“That’ll work. While we don’t have the exact route they take, we do know their place of origin and destinations for their convoys. We’ll need some time to prepare, though.”

“No problem. You did point out we can take our time with this. Let’s start by just monitoring their commercial activities for now. No need to dig too deep right away.”

The two then exchanged how they would stay in contact and the various operation protocols before they disbanded. They had delegated the tasks and would keep their distance most of the time. Their only contact would be a daily call where they shared info. It was a practice that prevented others from tracing them back to their company, yet allowed them to stay up to date on their info in case something happened to them.

Kriss would be sent to NLA while Ralph stayed in Elevate City.

Ralph’s first task was to scout out the flagship store of his target. He knew they were rapidly expanding in recent months, so he had to see how their recent product launch was doing. Investigating these economic indicators was his bread and butter.

He waited until the next day and got into the attire of a typical corpo; wearing a dreary suit, before making his way to the Oceanic Palace.

He first stopped at the food hall and got himself some breakfast. He didn't fail to realize one of the stores on this floor belonged to the company he was sent to investigate. After recharging with some grub, he walked into The Milkshake Halls.

Reviewing their menu and prices were some of the most mundane parts of his job. He also had to examine how the workers performed, their belonging to the company, and the standard cybernetics they were equipped with. One could tell a lot from these small things.

If the lower rung looked miserable, it meant their work environment could be exploited. They could investigate their immediate managers further, as they weren't likely to be much happier. This could lead him to some potential informants or even spies.

To a company operating at the level of Ralph's, the typical company safeguards would prove no issue to him. Even if his plots were discovered, it was easy to permanently silence these grassroots employees.

However, to Ralph's surprise, what he found was something he had never seen before in all his years. Over the short conversation he had with the employees, he heard only praise for their company. That wasn't uncommon as corpos were all under surveillance, but Ralph could tell from their tone and facial expressions that their true feelings were consistent with their words. His training and intuition all told him the same thing.

Normally, one would inevitably have some grievances with their employers, whether it be small or big. Ralph had to work the big ones out of them before he could be the devil by their ears. This time, he had met his match. He didn't find any openings from the employees to exploit.

Taking a sip of his milkshake, he quickly calmed down as the cool temperatures of the drink relieved him.

*I can analyze more later. Let's scout out the flagship store first.*

For better or worse, Ralph found the employees at the flagship store to be the same. This made him opt to focus on the products instead, as the personnel were so far a no go.

"So you're telling me this game of yours is compatible with any VR system? Your company doesn't have your own system?"

"That's correct, sir. Our support will still be available twenty-four-seven if you should need to contact us, but any system would do. You can also refund your pre-order at any time."

"You guys are a proper corporation, right? Not some indie game company?"

"Correct. You can expect the quality of our games to be at that level as well. In fact, this is one of the few places where you can play the demo right now."

Ralph sucked in his breath and fell into thought.

It was rare for a corporation not to push its own platform for its own VR games. It was the easiest way to retain repeat customers and additional projects as well. All they needed to do was ensure their product wouldn't work with games from other companies.

While corporations welcomed others to make their games compatible with their system, none allowed their own to work with the game systems of others.

That meant the only games that would work across all systems were from indie developers. They were too small to develop their own platform or cared enough about these corporate struggles to lock their games out. They simply wanted to push out their games to as many people as possible.

It may sound like it was all sunshine and rainbows selling games that worked across all platforms, but indie companies typically struggled. The budget, optimization, and support were something they all lacked. Even with their heart and passion, it was hard to compete against giant corporations with infinitely more resources.

Even if they found success, it would be short-lived as the top players would find a way to wrestle back the market. Sometimes, it would be filled with threats and coercion, while others may be with plagiarism. Only rarely would they get bought out instead.

Those on top stayed on top.

With his curiosity piqued, Ralph pre-purchased the game so he could study it further when the time came. The other products, like the cybernetics and vehicles, were out for some time now that he didn't need to purchase samples. He was sure someone in his company had already done so.

That was why he only took a precursory look before returning to his hideout.

He didn't forget to contact his partner. He had to update her on his progress.

"How's it going there, Kriss? Enjoying NLA so far?"

"Oh, you wouldn't believe it. It's pretty crazy here."

Even without having to analyze the hidden meanings in her words, Ralph could already tell the distress from his coworker. Her message practically yelled out how abnormal the company they were investigating was.

*What is it now?*