

Chapter 33: Looking Around

“So, your real name is Rollo? I didn’t have a chance to say thank you the other day.”

I stared at the woman for a second, as my memory failed to remind me who she was.

“...You don’t remember me? You helped me the other night in NLA.”

Right, the one I tried to ignore and walked out on.

“Right, glad to see you’re okay.”

“...Our leader told me to brief you on Perry. Follow me.”

“We’ll meet you outside when you’re done, Rollo.” Sarah cut off in the middle of her conversation with her father to inform me.

The woman named Jane led me out of the room, leaving Sarah and her family behind. We went to a small office nearby with real paper documents messily strewn across the room.

Jane dug through several folders, chucking a few in a growing pile until she found what she was looking for, “Here, everything we found in the city. Last seen in the entertainment area, here’s the photo captured from a nearby security camera.”

The folder had actual printed-out copies of the photos instead of the digital copies I had gotten used to. The image showed a red-haired teenager, Perry, the missing wastelander from Clan Wells.

I recorded everything with my implants before returning the files to Jane.

“...Please try your best to find her. Her parents haven’t been doing so well since she’s gone missing.”

“Understood. We’ll start looking tonight when I get back. I’ll do my best, but I can’t make any promises.”

“Did she have any friends or enemies in the city?” Vin stepped forward and broke his silence.

“Of course not. We don’t have much contact with outsiders. It was her first time in the city...”

Vin asked a few more questions but didn’t uncover anything new, so we made our way back while Jane stayed to pack and got ready to accompany us.

“Chances are, some corpos got her for who knows what. Nothing good for sure, with the escalation they have with wastelanders. It’s a waste of time looking for her,” Vin mumbled as soon as we were out of earshot.

“We never know. It’s worth a try for sure, though. I’d like to take this opportunity to improve my relationship with the wastelanders too.”

“...You’re the boss. I’ll let you know when you’re about to do something dumb.”

Despite his words, it was obvious Vin wanted to help as well, but didn’t want to get anyone’s hopes up.

“Sure thing. I’m counting on you to do so.”

We met up with Sarah’s group, who were chatting with the two guards just outside the building, where I met Eugene.

“Welcome back, done with all the business?”

“Yeah, going to be my tour guide now?”

“You betcha! First stop, the mootant stables!”

Following the high-spirited siblings, we proceeded through a majority of the small town and headed toward the outskirts. We passed by more people than I had thought. It wouldn’t surprise me if there were a thousand people here.

We continued until we reached a tent-like building, where it started to smell like a farm. Upon entering inside, the smell intensified as dozens and dozens of mutant cows neatly lined up in their own stall.

“That’s a lot of cows...Where do you even get enough grasses to feed them?”

“They’re mootants. They don’t eat grass like normal cows. They just need lots of water, sunlight, and whatever food scraps we have.” Sarah said as she petted a nearby cow.

“Do they produce milk?” Vin asked.

“Yep. Want to try some later?”

“Sure.”

We continued our tour and headed back in the direction of town, where we got a look at their garages, which were more like warehouses that houses dozens of cars plus space for their mechanics to do maintenance. We also saw a giant platform that was attached to several trucks. It wasn’t surprising, considering their need for transport while they were on the move.

Our final stop was their medical facility before we settled for lunch. They didn’t have that much in terms of medical equipment and supplies, which I guessed was a reason they even bothered to head into the city at all. There were some things they simply didn’t have access to anywhere else.

Lunch was served in a shared communal dining hall where we brought our trays and lined up for food, where everyone received the same thing.

For once, the food actually appeared to be real, and not the vat-grown proteins with flavoring added. When I bit into the steak, my eyes couldn't help but get a little wet. I just missed good food so much. I've had enough of all the shit I've been eating since coming to this world.

"Is that a new model arm you got?" I glanced over to see little Caleb staring at my arm fervently.

My new cyberarm was the same steel color as my old one and looked similar. You would have to get a closer look to spot the difference in the model.

"Yeah, how's it look?"

"So cool! I wish I could get one...but I don't think Dad would allow it," He shrunk back.

From what I've seen, there isn't many wastelander with a lot of cybernetics, they didn't have much equipment for it either in their medical facility.

"Caleb, you know better than to ask for prosthetics when you have a perfectly working body!" Sarah reprimanded.

Caleb didn't respond and continued to eat his food as he looked down.

It wasn't my place to get involved in something so personal and everyone seemed to agree, so we moved on to other topics as we ate.

After our visit to Sarah's home, we started our journey back to the city with an additional person onboard.

Thankfully, the new place we had in town had ample space so she could stay in one of the spare rooms. Once we got back, we introduced her to the security there and dropped her off while I returned to my hotel.

We regrouped for dinner, which it also served as a strategy briefing before we started our search for the missing girl. Dinner was completely unappetizing with its synthetic taste after the lunch I had, so I just quickly stuffed myself to fuel my body.

Though in Vin's case, he didn't seem to have any obvious preference, which could only mean his taste buds had gone bad or corporate propaganda had brainwashed him and was a lost cause, or maybe a bit of both.

"So let's split up for tonight and ask around. Tomorrow, we'll hire a cy-specialist through a Quest Giver to do some digging," I laid out as I sipped on a milkshake.

“You know, the fastest way is to reach out to as many QGs as possible and enlist their help for the search directly,” Vin said, as he struggled to cut through the fake steak he ordered.

“That’ll also notify everyone we’re looking for her and if anyone looks further into it, they’ll know she’s a wastelander. And I’m not even going to get started on how their relationship with the corporations in this city is right now.”

“Right, even most city folks don’t take kindly to us,” Jane chimed in.

“Let’s see how it goes tonight first. We’ll rendezvous in a few hours.”

I split off with the two of them and began my search. I was familiar with stalking the streets at night, as it was my main method of gaining experience points with the system. I could’ve gotten my other security guys to do it, but I never saw myself ever sitting back and letting others do my bidding, not with the system to level.

The difference this time was my goal. I was trying to look for information, not zero some vile criminals.

There were a few guys I had seen on my previous nights in town who stood around on the streets. They sold drugs and contraband that I had ignored, but this time, I chose to approach one.

“What do you want, co?” A paranoid-looking man asked as he continued to peer left and right.

“Looking for someone, I’ll give you a hundred credits for any verifiable info.”

“Fuck off, I ain’t no snitch.” The man aggressively shooed me off.

The other dealers had similar reactions, albeit some in more polite ways, but I wasn’t getting anywhere. I changed up the strategy and asked around stores and street vendors. They all made me buy something and gave me vague descriptions that I was 90% sure were made up.

Just as I was about to have my SAID hail a cab to move to another area, I overheard a voice of someone screaming out in pain.

I turned up my auditory implant and moved toward the source. In a nearby alleyway, I found two drunk men who appeared to be corporate workers judging from their attire. They repeatedly kicked an old homeless man who was still in his sleeping bag.

The pair laughed as they took turns slamming their feet into the torso of the poor man. He groaned in pain at every hit but otherwise just laid there and took the beating.

“Haha, how do you like that? This is what you get for stinking up the streets. Go get a job, you lazy fucker.”

“Watch it, Kevin. You’re bloodying him up and it’s getting on my shoes.”

I wasn't a saint who donated to homeless people at every chance. Maybe when I was younger and more naive. But as I grew up and dealt with the pressure of my bills building up, I simply ignored them, and that was that.

Whatever these two were doing right now, though, was simply too far out of line.

I didn't even bother with my active camouflage, as they were distracted by their senseless violence, so I managed to stroll right behind them. I didn't plan on killing them for this, though. It wasn't worth alarming their corporate security team.

Even with my own business, I had software installed on all my employees to monitor them, so I knew for sure corporations had a more advanced version compared to the homemade product by Leo and Lana. A death would definitely alert them so I grabbed some broken broom nearby as I closed the distance.

With them distracted, I swiped the end of my broom right toward the temple of one while I swept the feet of the other. I quickly winded up an overhead swing and brought it down on the second person, who was on the ground.

The two were knocked out easily, as they likely never had any training whatsoever and lived lives that didn't require any fighting.

My old habit of looting took over, and I emptied their pockets. After all, they deserved it.

"You okay?" I offered a hand to the homeless man.

"Ye, thank you, but you don't have to worry bout me." He avoided my hand and pushed off from the ground for leverage instead, with the other hand tightly holding on to his belongings.

"Here, take this. It's the least they owe you." I split the credits I got from the two and gave the man half.

He hesitated for a short moment and quickly snapped it up.

"Thanks." He turned around and began walking past me while leaning on the wall for support.

Well, back to asking around. Should I try to interrogate these two once they wake up? Nah, too much trouble, wait, might as well ask everyone I can.

"Hey wait! I'm looking for this person in the photo here. There's some reward money if you provide verifiable info." I showed one of the pictures I got from Jane of Perry once he turned around.

"...Ye, I've seen her before. Doesn't carry herself like most folks, so I remember. She walked into the club two streets down two days ago."