

Chapter 130: Connections

I patiently waited as Emma was on call to see to my request to visit a resident around here.

I wished I could have done my own investigation into this Robert Lee, but there wasn't much we could find of an inner-city resident from the outside world.

Lion City wasn't one of the places where you could easily do what you wanted with just some bribes or exerting influence by flaunting your might. Their government may be known as draconian, but they upheld their order relentlessly and cared for their citizens.

It took a whole ten minutes before Emma's call ended.

"I have gotten into contact with the man in question and he has agreed for me to bring you to him."

"Great! Thanks!"

"No need to thank me. Every citizen here has the right to invite their guests over, which also means this wouldn't have happened if your friend declined to meet with you. I am just the messenger." She stopped to glance over at a car pulling up. "If you would please follow me, Mr. Halls. We should be able to get there within twenty minutes."

We got into the car and slowly made our way through the traffic. I watched as we passed by numerous buildings that all looked similar until we arrived at what appeared to be the commercial district. The high rises were replaced with spacious low-rise malls with the side streets between them filled with various stores and food markets.

Watching the crowd of people as they happily shopped was somewhat surreal. None of them were cautious of their surroundings as they merrily enjoyed themselves with their family. It was a stark difference from the usual people who always had one hand hovering over their weapons or were eyeing the nearest escape paths.

It may be because weapons were banned here, with strict enforcement, and criminals were swiftly dealt with, but either way, it was refreshing seeing everyone so relaxed.

We soon cut through the commercial district and came into another boring residential district, and the car stopped outside one of the many apartment complexes common throughout the inner city.

Entering the lobby, Emma walked up to the terminal by the entrance and entered several digits, and a call was placed. It was quickly picked up and the camera above the terminal lit up.

"Hi, Mr. Lee. I'm Emma and this is Mr. Halls. We spoke on the phone earlier."

“Yes, please come in.”

The doors buzzed open, and we made our way toward the elevators. The elevator doors opened with a joyful family walked out, holding their toddler’s hand as they laughed and talked. It made me feel I came to the wrong place to be searching for a battle-hardened mercenary.

We came up to the fifteenth floor and Emma led me to unit 1513. The door immediately opened as we drew near without even having to knock and an old man with a head full of white hair greeted us.

Following behind him was a large woman who cautiously peeked out at us, but her eyes softened the moment our gazes met.

“Thank you for bringing our acquaintance here, Ms. Emma. Please feel free to come in as well.”

“No need to thank me. I’m just doing my job. I’ll be waiting outside.”

Emma dubiously glanced back and forth between me, the old man, and Erza behind him before backing away, seeing that there was nothing wrong. The old man then gestured for me to go in and the door closed behind me, separating me from my guide for the first time since entering the inner city.

“A pleasure meeting you, Mr. Halls. You might’ve heard, but I’m Robert Victis Lee. You can call me Robert. I hear that you’re a friend of Erza, here.” The old man said as he shook my hand.

“The pleasure is mine, Robert. Please call me Rollo as well.” I looked over at the woman beside him. “So Erza, got an explanation of what’s going on? You know Flo’s been searching for you.”

She hesitated and glanced over at Robert, then towards a room in the back. Seeing her gaze, Robert took the hint.

“That’s right... How could I forget to serve tea to guests? Old age sure makes people forgetful. If you would excuse me for a moment. Please make yourself at home.”

As he walked off to the kitchen, Erza led me toward the room in the back. We entered a bedroom, and I could see a lump on the bed, underneath the blankets.

Our movements had awoken the person who had been resting there, causing them to sit up and reveal their visage to me. It was a girl with pink hair and one that I recognized as Erza’s teammate from the camera footage we dredged up yesterday.

“Can you tell me what’s going on now, Erza?”

She looked over at her friend before nodding.

“A certain QG is after us for...unknown reasons.”

“Not unknown reason, because I saw them during their gig and they want to silence me now!”
The pink-haired girl interjected.

“We’re still not sure about that.” Erza shook her head at the girl. “Rollo, we don’t know much. Eli here suddenly got attacked after a trip to the clinic, and whichever QG it is, they were relentless. They kept sending people after us right away, so we decided to make use of our connections, and here we are.”

“You guys sure made some unique connections around here.” I looked back toward the door and couldn’t help but use my Argus to perform a quick scan, only to find the old man still a distance away in the kitchen.

“Mr. Lee is a nice person, but he doesn’t know about any of this. He simply invited us over to chat, and the inner city of Lion City happened a very safe place.”

“I see, but I doubt you could stay here indefinitely. You should leave with me and we’ll deal with those ‘problems’ as they come up. I have Flo and some of my men here. We can handle it.”

“...We can still stay here for a few more days. I think we should make full use of it. If we come back with you, their lookouts will notice immediately and a big fight may break out then and there. You should go inform Flo and have your men catch them off guard.”

“Not a bad plan, though we still don’t know who we’re dealing with, right?”

“Eli said she recognized some of the mercenaries after us, so it must be someone from around the area she is usually in. Eli, why don’t you name off every QG that you suspect?”

The girl held her gaze at Erza for a moment before alternating between us.

“...You want me to reveal all my contacts to some corpo? I won’t be able to deal with them ever again if they find out, and trust me, they will. Every single one that this corpo friend of yours goes near will sour an important connection for me, so no thanks.”

I wasn’t unfamiliar with how every mercenary needed to know how to keep their mouths shut. It was simply how the common folks protected themselves from the corporate overlords, so I completely understood where she was coming from.

Still, not having any intel to go on will prolong this by quite a bit...

“...I don’t suppose you’re the target of their gigs and they just want to silence you because of their other job, right?” I asked the mercenary girl.

“It’s not uncommon to have in their contracts to silence any witnesses when on certain types of gigs.”

“I don’t suppose going around threatening QGs is a good idea. Do you know how we can stop it, then?”

“...I’m not sure. I’ve never been on this end of it before and we usually don’t stop until the QG tells us to.”

“So there’s like a contract expiration on these types of jobs, or can I negotiate with them?”

If it was possible, I’d rather not go around hunting QGs. I relied on them often enough that I didn’t want to close any doors to their community, even if it was out here in Lion City. Besides, they weren’t that easy to hunt down, as they each likely were used to corporations gunning for their head. Information was their trade, and I would be a fool to believe they didn’t know how to keep themselves safe.

“Maybe...I don’t know.”

I took a peek at Erza, who shrugged in reply.

“Anyway...We’ll go look into it first. Now that we can contact you through this Robert person, we’ll stay in touch.”

It was annoying how the inner city’s comms were isolated, but now that we knew who to reach, our messages should be able to be redirected to them. We may not be able to place a direct call through, but texts should work, albeit with a slight delay.

“Wait, how did you find Mr. Lee in the first place? We need to look into it in case someone else uses your method to find us.” Erza grabbed my sleeve as I tried to turn around.

“Oh, no need to worry about that. We found your other team members, and they told us about who you knew from the inner city when we asked.”

“So Lara and Trisha are okay! Can you help me send a video recording to them? I’ll do it right away!” Eli excitedly chimed in.

“Sure...You got anything else you want me to bring to Flo, Erza? Maybe a message as well?”

“No thanks. I’ll see her soon enough.”

“She’s been pretty worried about you, but suit yourself...”

“You realize whichever QG is responsible for hunting them down isn’t going to be willing to hear us out, right?” Thorne dryly stated, with arms crossed.

I looked at each person sitting in my hotel room, and they all seemed to agree with him.

“They should already know we’re here and are keeping an eye on us to avoid us entirely,” Flo added.

“That means we’ve already got their attention. Now we just need to convey our intentions to them.”

“Rollo, you’re oversimplifying this. They’ve got someone or something tracking us, sure, but QGs are elusive people. They wouldn’t want to entertain you for even a moment over comms, in case you were trying to track them down or trick them somehow,” Andrew clarified.

“Then what? We should do as they feared and track them down so they listen to us? We should send a message to them through a third party or something, then. Maybe find one of their mercs?”

“No merc will play along with corpos like us when they’re not sure if we’re plotting against them,” Flo said as she took a large swig from her flask.

“...”

Silence filled my room for a moment as we each brainstormed for ideas. We had a few days left until the time was up when Erza and her friend Eli would have to leave the inner city and fighting would flare up.

“We should just hunt down every single mercenary that took the job,” Thorne muttered.

“...You want to go murder a bunch of mercenaries just doing their job when they’re also our main customer base? Word will spread you know, we’d earn quite a reputation alright...a repugnant one.”

I drained my cup of milkshake as I fell in thought until the sound of me slurping air broke my concentration.

“How about we find an expert in these types of negotiation to be our third party instead? One that is used to handling both corpos and QGs.”

“What do you mean, Rollo? I don’t think any corpos around here specialize in providing negotiators.”

“I’m not talking about a corpo, Thorne. I’m talking about a third-party QG. They would know best how to negotiate with their peers and would naturally be able to contact them.”

“That’s...actually a pretty good idea...”

Seeing everyone in the room nod in agreement, I wasted no time and placed a call to Erza’s mercenary friends.

“Hey Trisha, we found Erza and Eli. I have something they wanted to give you and a question for you as well. Can you come over here right now to discuss something as well?”