

Chapter 58: Bush Clan

The next morning, we headed into the wasteland with the daily scheduled convoy, which now consisted of a dozen Vanguards and two trucks.

We used the devices we had gotten from the Wells clan to locate them, as they occasionally moved around. Apparently, most wasteland clans were nomadic within their own territories. They were well connected with their neighbors too, owing to sharing the common threat of corporations.

A little more than an hour after trekking across the wasteland's sandstorm, we soon approached the Wells clan's encampment. As usual, they set up their base somewhere the sandstorm couldn't reach. Familiar buildings entered my sight as their guards escorted us in.

"Rollo!" Sarah and Caleb cried out as they welcomed me.

"How are you two doing?"

"Good," Sarah smiled, while Caleb had a different answer. "Boring, can I go to the city with you?"

"Ha, I don't think your sister or father would approve. If you get their permission, I'd be happy to take you around."

"Really?" The innocent boy replied, only to receive a karate chop to the head from his sister. "Ouch!"

"Enough, Rollo is busy. Follow us, we'll take you to Dad."

"Sure, thank you."

We found Eugene, their dad, in his usual position atop a stack of carpets with his pipe in hand.

"Welcome, Rollo. Thank you for coming."

"Thank you for having me. They said you have news regarding my request for an introduction to the neighboring clan?"

"That is correct. I have spoken to the Bush Clan up north, and they are willing to hear you out. Anything beyond that is for you two parties to discuss."

"And how will we find them?"

"They will be sending an envoy to guide you. Return in three days and you can depart with them. You can bring no more than six rides."

"Understood, thank you."

After frolicking around with Sarah and Caleb for a bit, we returned to the city. When I shared the news with the rest of the company that night, Thorne insisted he had recovered and would be flying over in two days.

The next day, I once again went to check out some electric vehicles, but this time, we went to a racetrack. The racing scene here was a little more violent than what I was used to. They allowed a degree of contact as they traversed an obstacle course. As a corporate-sponsored sport, they had the budget to implement more advanced tech, which ironically made it a somewhat safe sport.

Vin accompanied me once again. We got there a little early and took a tour of the racetrack and the old models of the vehicles they used in the past, inside the museum across the street.

When we returned from our tour, the racetrack got even more crowded and seemed to be on an upward trend as more time passed. We made our way into our seats in the stands. Everyone in our area seemed to be wealthy, as I overheard them boasting about the large amount they would soon win.

It only made sense as we bought the 'corpo' seats. Otherwise, we'd be constantly getting looks from the general public as Vin was dressed in our company's uniform.

"You're not betting, Rollo?" Vin asked.

"Nope, the house always wins. I'm just here to enjoy the show."

"Well, I'm not complaining. I'm getting paid to be here after all."

Before I could respond, a man's voice rang out from beside me

"You there. Is this your first time here?"

"Yes. Is there a problem?"

"Oh, nothing like that. It's just I overheard your conversation and I can't let it stand without teaching you the joys of motorsport."

Why do I always attract the weirdos...

"It's okay, I'd—"

"Please, listen. The only way to truly enjoy the race is to place a bet. You don't have to bet too much, mind you, just enough so you have a stake in it. The thrill it can bring you would almost make you think you're in the car with the racers themselves." He pointed at the big screen above that showed first-person camera footage from the driver's perspective.

I listened to him ramble on as Vin ignored the looks of help I was giving him. It only got worse when the races started.

Thankfully, my auditory implant let me filter out his long-winded speeches. I only unmuted him when the race was finally over.

“That was magnificent! Oh, where are my manners? My name is Joey Moretti. How about you?”
The man offered me his hand.

“Rollo. And apologies, I do have to—”

“Oh, Rollo, my good friend, do you happen to have time to join me for lunch? I happen to have some authentic steaks reserved at a nearby restaurant. It would please me if you could join me.”

“I don’t think—”

Wait.

Steak? Damn it, how can I say no to that?

“I don’t think that would be a bad idea if you don’t mind having me, Mr. Moretti.”

“Please, call me Joey.”

He led me to a nearby restaurant and when we entered, a dozen or so of the staff welcomed us.

“Welcome, boss!” They shouted out in unison.

“Don’t mind me. I’m just going to be having lunch with a new friend here.”

“So, you own this restaurant?” I couldn’t help but ask.

“Haha, yes, our company does have a hand in the food service industry. But I’m not here to promote my store to you. I really reserved some fine steaks for us to enjoy.”

From the searches I did through my SAID, Authentic Corp was a major player in the food industry. They had dozens of restaurants and were even larger than the Desire Corp that screwed me over.

I instantly grew wary and shared a glance with Vin.

“Is there anything the boss of Authentic Corp would want with me?” I asked cautiously.

“Relax, it’s a hobby of mine to make new friends. You may not believe me, but I think I’m a pretty good judge of character. It’s one of my secrets to success!”

“I see...”

“I don’t even know much about you besides your name. It’s not fair that you’re the only one who knows about my company now. Why don’t you introduce what you do as well?”

“...Some minor cybernetics and transportation.”

“Transportation, wonderful. Our company is always striving to build a robust logistic network so our restaurants can serve the freshest food with the largest selection. If you would like, I can have my secretary talk business with you.”

“I appreciate it, but maybe in the future. We don’t have much capability right now and are in the middle of an expansion.”

As if waiting for our conversation to die down, the several waiters entered together with a dozen different dishes.

“Haha, I hope you don’t mind. I’m an impatient fellow when it comes to food. I like to have everything come at once.”

Our conversation soon moved back to motorsport while we ate. As much as I wanted to, I didn’t mute him this time. I didn’t have it in me to mute someone who was conversing with me while looking me in the eye.

At least there was steak as promised, and it was exquisite!

Upon returning to the office after grinding some experience points, I began tinkering with the Vanguard I bought with Vin.

The first step was simply to disassemble it to study the different parts, and there was a lot that went into a car. The parts I was most interested in were the electric motors and the materials of the frame.

I wanted my vehicles to have the ability to hide from scans. It won’t be that effective in normal conditions as there are many detection methods, but it became exponentially more effective out in the wasteland.

All the knowledge of stealth technology told me I needed to be careful of motor and electronics placement. I also needed to paint a layer of radar-absorbing materials over the entire car, which was expensive, to say the least.

There were definitely some alternatives too that required further research.

I only noticed that night was over when the knocking behind me broke me out of my trance.

“Rollo, what are you doing? Preparing for the wasteland trip?”

I turned around and found Thorne at the door, carrying several bags.

“Thorne! You’re here already.”

“Yeah, I had got a few people to take over my responsibilities. They should be able to handle it without me.”

“Sounds good to me. If Claire let you go, then it should be okay.”

“...” He broke eye contact and examined the room. “Anyway, what are you working on?”

“Just trying to make our cars harder to detect. I’m still playing around, so don’t expect anything for our trip.”

“Don’t worry. This time, I’ll make sure to keep you safe.”

“And yourself too. Go unpack in your room first. We can discuss our travel plans later.”

Tinkering with the car made time pass by in the blink of an eye, and it was soon time for us to set out for the wasteland to meet up with the envoy from the Bush Clan.

Seeing our success in running our transportation business thanks to our connections, I couldn’t help but want to replicate that on a new route.

That was why I had Eugene introduce us to the clan that was in between NLA and Salt Lake City. They weren’t the only clan on the way there, but we had to start somewhere.

Our convoy this time only had half a dozen cars, as that was the rule they had in accepting to see us.

We cut through the wasteland and soon made it to the Wells Clan, as we had done a few days prior. We were led to the usual spot, at a clearing to park, but this time, there were several dune buggies already there that sported different markings from the Well Clan’s vehicles.

When we got out of the cars, Eugene, the chief, was there to greet us, along with several other wastelanders.

“Gene, it’s an honor to have you come greet us,” I said.

“Rollo, welcome. Allow me to introduce you to our guests from the Bush Clan. This here is Jamie from the Bush Clan.”

A rough-looking man with a full beard similar to Eugene’s stepped forward from an entourage of wastelanders dressed similarly. While the Wells clan dressed in sand-colored clothing with

stripes on them, the Bush Clan seemed to prefer scattered shapes scattered randomly on their clothes.

“So you are the corpo friend of the Wells Clan. Our leader is willing to hear you out, but don’t expect a warm welcome from the rest of the clan. We’ve fought against the city-dwelling corpos for a long time, and some grudges inevitably remain.”

“I understand. I am honored that your people are willing to welcome me to your clan.”

He nodded, “Very well, let us make haste. It would be wise for us to get there before sunset.”

He then boarded the buggies with his entourage of guards, as we did the same. One of their guards came over and handed us transceivers to stay in touch before we got on our way.

Exiting the Wells Clan’s base, the everlasting sandstorm soon consumed our vision.

“We’re heading further and further away from NLA. You sure this is a good idea, Rollo?” Vin asked an hour into the drive.

“It’s impossible to be sure of anything, we can only prepare. That’s why you guys are here.”

“Ha, don’t worry. All the boys are alert and know what to do out here.”

As if to prove his words, one of the drivers of the other car yelled into our comms.

“Contact! We got a dozen cars on course to intercept us.”

I shared a look with Vin, “You had to jinx us, didn’t you...”

“Don’t look at me boss, the wastelands are a lawless area for a reason. Something always comes up.”

A short moment later, a fierce explosion blew away the area of impact for a split second.

“Evasive action, get ready to earn your paycheck, you guys,” Vin yelled. “The Bush Clan vehicles are spreading out toward our foes, so I don’t think they’re hostile.”

“Get us into contact with the Bush Clan envoy. We need to coordinate our actions with them so we don’t accidentally blow them along with the enemies,” I commanded.

I sure hope these are just random bandits because nothing has been going my way recently...