

Chapter 38: Beaten to the Punch

The view of Elevate City sprawling with life filled my eyes from the passenger seat of the car.

“So, tell me about this new competitor of ours,” I looked over to Thorne in the driver’s seat.

His eyes took on a glow before he replied, “The Hathway Corporation, led by James Hathway, has been a declining corporation since the time of his father. They specialize in projection technology used in various large-sized terminals used for presentations and conferences.”

“So it wouldn’t be hard for them to use that technology for producing a working active camouflage.”

“Yes, but I’ve seen their product, and it’s just that, a smart projector. It isn’t nearly as optimized as ours for use in the field, with much worse reliability and uptime.”

“That means their threat is minimal. They only have the first mover’s advantage right now?”

“Right...but from my investigation this morning, they have some pretty bad reputation in their industry. They’re infamous for corporate espionage and stealing their competitor’s tech.”

“Well, that fits their image of a declining business that is desperate to stay afloat. We need to stay alert for thieves...”

“Yes, but me and Claire have been more worried about other corporations taking the opportunity to enter the market. If Hathway can butt their heads into our industry, so can any other corps. We need to launch our product first and snatch up some market share.”

“Hmmm, that’s what we were going to do anything. There isn’t much else we can do but keep improving our products. Don’t worry too much about it. The bigger corporations are more interested in defending their more lucrative markets, so it wouldn’t make sense to leak one of their corporate espionage techs to their competitors to earn some chump change. We’ll just need to beat out the smaller players.”

“Right.”

“So anyway, how’s it going with you, Claire? Gotten any better with cy-sec and cybernetics?” I turned to look at the girl sitting at the back.

“You betcha, I’ve been practicing chrome installation virtually too. I should be ready to get that cyber surgeon license in a few more months, but I’ll need to save up for the bribe to get all my credentials like you did.”

“I’ll foot the bill for it if you keep up the good work.”

“Really?! Yes, please! Allow your faithful underling to give you a massage, boss!” She held onto my shoulder from behind.

As much as she is joking around, she isn't half bad at giving massages.

“So tell us, how was your trip to NLA? You said you got hurt in the wasteland as well. Is it really that dangerous out there?” Claire asked.

The massage paused while she awaited my answer. I wasn't sure if she was really interested or just wanted to distract me because she didn't want to continue the massage, but I might as well oblige.

“Yeah, the sandstorm that rages in the wasteland was insane. It was a breathtaking scene when I first saw it. I also met Sarah and Caleb with their tribe. They were various mutant animals too...”

“Make sure you adjust the connection here based on the scans for each patient, especially on the first installation. The difference between a good job and a poor job will significantly affect the chances of rejection, infections, swelling, pain, and the entire bag of complications,” I held up the cybernetic to be installed for Claire to see.

She had been studying with the surgeons at the clinic, but decided to observe my first installation since coming back. I was installing a health monitor implant on the client that allowed them to have a detailed grasp of their real-time condition. It was an entry model that went for a few thousand credits. The more expensive models had nanomachines to help repair any sustained trauma.

The installation was completed without a hitch and I let Claire do the calibrations with the patient at my supervision.

“So Doc, do you think it's okay for me to keep chroming up? I've heard a lot of horror stories about people getting corrupted, becoming those emotionless drones when they get too much chrome, too fast...”

“You'll be fine for quite a few more augmentations unless you have some faulty SAID. That's why it's important to regularly come in for checkups,” I opted not to elaborate further as it would get too technical.

The calibrations were soon complete and Claire quickly returned after she walked the client out.

She reviewed the note she took on her terminal, “What was that talk about people getting corrupted?”

“It's slang for a topic you'll learn soon if not already regarding anhedonia as a result of cybernetics.”

“Ah, the one that makes you emotionless like a robot.”

“Right, it’s not that common, or else cybernetics wouldn’t be so common, but it doesn’t stop people from fearing it because of all the horror stories of how some corporations purposefully inflict the corruption on people to make them their mindless minions,” I collected my belongings and stood up. “Follow me if you want to continue our chat. I’m going to work on something in my workshop.”

“Nah, I’m okay. I’m going to order lunch. Anything you want?”

I opened the door and turned back to reply, “Nope, just get me whatever.”

Just as I cleared the door, I heard Claire’s voice catch up after me, “With a milkshake?”

“Yep, thank you!”

Entering my workshop, I continued working on the project I started last night when I heard about Hathway Corp. There was a high chance they knew about our stealth implant and may send infiltrators to steal our tech to dominate the market.

The market for stealth tech wasn’t that large. The ratio of mercenaries to the general population was barely considered a drop in the bucket and expressed as a decimal. The market for stealth implants was even smaller, being only a fraction of all mercenaries.

That was why I was working on a countermeasure. It was convenient that knowing a lot about stealth tech also made you privy to their weakness and detection methods as well. From the stealth tech they were selling, it seemed to be only an optical camouflage, so we had infrared cameras installed. Still, I wanted more options for me and my personnel because the thermal vision on optics makes you pretty much blind to everything else.

With speed and practicality being the main focus, I rushed the job a little in order to create enough for the entire security team.

“Did you need something?” Thorne opened the door to my workshop and asked.

“Here, take these to replace the visors on securities’ headgear.” I threw a case over to him.

He took one out and flipped it back and forth, studying the dull grey visor, “You sure these are combat-rated? Any instruction on how to use them?”

“No, but it should do its job. It’s already calibrated to use our encrypted channels that are only accessible to our employees with the company software, so just slot it on. It’ll automatically do that rest.”

“Okay.”

With Thorne gone, I cleaned up the workshop and headed to the break room, where I found the food and drinks Claire had gotten for me.

After a quick lunch break, it's back to work time. Why do I feel it hasn't changed much from my part-time job days...?

The day went by slowly as I continued carrying out my scheduled installations and chatted with Thorne and Claire during the downtime. The clinic closed and most workers went home except for security. They worked in four shifts, so it wasn't that terrible, but that also meant there were only three of them not counting Thorne.

"They're ordering food, you want anything, Rollo?" Thorne came in to ask as I was getting ready to go out for some good ole community cleanup that paid in experience points.

"No thanks, I'm heading out soon."

"...Right."

Thorne would stay back to guard the place, so I would be heading out alone for now.

I finished cleaning my two pistols and collected ammo from my stockpile before I put on a black armored suit. By the time I finished, the deliveryman had already arrived and was at the door of the lobby, where two of the security team members were waiting.

One good thing about delivery here was definitely its speed. It was way faster than what I was used to in my old world. I wasn't sure if that was because the people here were impatient, jobs were competitive, or because the food they made here was completely trash and required no prep time at all. Probably leaning closer to that last one.

I waited for the deliveryman to leave first before I did, as I didn't want to startle him with all the gear I was wearing. After all, they were rightfully strapped while they worked in this dangerous world.

Just as the door closed behind the deliveryman, the conversation between my two employees abruptly ceased and an awkward second passed by in complete silence as they shared looks. The silence was then immediately broken by the sound of weapons being drawn, pointing toward the doorway.

They reacted well to a situation they weren't familiar with, but it was still too slow. I had already pulled the trigger of my railgun, filling the lobby with the noise of the projectile breaking the sound barrier.

Small pieces of metal debris scattered around the area I shot. The space flickered around the entrance before a person decked out in a black suit similar to mine suddenly materialized and slumped to the ground.

+10 EXP

Footsteps then quickly came from behind me and I watched Thorne rush out from behind.

“What’s—” He came to a full stop and glanced at the new body by the entrance, “...Bring the body inside and clean up the entrance. I’ll call someone to repair the door.” He ordered one of the two guards.

I looked up at the door where the glass window part of it cracked, and now sported a small hole.

Okay, another good thing about this world was how fast they built and repaired shit.

“What was that?” Thorne’s voice broke me from my musing.

“What was what?” I looked back at him, “You know, suddenly I could see the highlight of someone through the walls.”

“Didn’t I explain? The visors I gave you are linked to our channels, including the new infrared cameras. They spotted the guy creeping up and shared the view with us in real-time. That way, we don’t all have to always have thermal on.”

“...I thought they only had a thermal optic add-on. You only said they allowed us to spot active camouflage. This is entirely different. We’ll have to train on how to properly take advantage of the possibilities this allows for.”

“Yeah, you should be able to find some references online regarding the training. This stuff is pretty bread and butter amongst all corporation securities.”

It would be more common among mercenaries too if it didn’t require an expensive main server to process the data, and the know-how to keep the connection encrypted. Otherwise, enemies would just spy on the channel and you would suddenly let enemies see everything you saw.

We followed the guard, who carried the body into one of the unoccupied operating rooms. The body was placed on the table where I started performing an autopsy. The equipment I used to scan patients for a detailed view of their bodies in preparation for cybernetic installations took care of the majority of the work, but even then, it took a whole hour.

When I finished, Claire helpfully handed me a smoothie to refresh myself. Though Thorne didn’t let me enjoy my drink as he stepped forward and pressed me for the results, “So, did you find out anything useful?”

“Just some data we can look further into with, not much other than—” Without warning, a loud explosion shook the building.

I briskly re-equipped my headgear and looked around. My visor highlighted a dozen figures and vehicles through the walls.

“Thorne, you might have to order more than just a door.”