

Chapter 160: Least Worst Option

“Rollo, what are you doing? Why are you bringing him with us? There’s no way we can take control of his SAID in such a short time. He’ll give away our location! You said we’re dealing with big corpos for god’s sake.”

I ignored his ramblings as I shoved our captive into our car.

“You said you have value as a hostage. Speak, who are you?”

“...I’m the son of the security director of our forces. You can trade me for safe passage! I’m sure of it.” The young man frantically explained, despite his restraints.

“...I see. What was your mission? It must not have been to murder us or else you could’ve done things a lot differently or made use of a more destructive arsenal.”

“...I—”

“Speak!” I yelled as I grabbed his throat.

“Okay, okay. We were sent to capture you. We were never after your life. There’s no reason to kill me, dude.”

“That is yet to be decided.” I glanced over at the front of the car as Claire and Thorne got in. “Start driving around for a bit. Stick to the downtown area by large corporate office buildings.”

“...Rollo, you have to know bringing him with us would mean they can constantly track us down. We should ditch that guy and find a way out of the city ASAP!” Thorne yelled back.

“I would love to do that too, but can’t you see? It’s too late!”

“So what? You seriously think capturing one of the goons of whoever sent them after us will give us a chance?”

“No, but it’ll give them a reason to at least hear us out. Just drive around for a bit. I need some time to prepare for negotiations.”

“Guys...stop arguing. You’re both obviously just winging it, so it’s not a bad idea to create some time to think things through first. I’ll reach out to Lucy to see if she can find us a way out of here,” Claire added.

“As long as you guys are willing to release me, I’m sure my dad can agree to your conditions,” our captive called out.

“Shut up!” I yelled.

I back-handed him as another warning and he obediently huddled into the corner.

The car began moving, and a stifling silence descended on us. It made the sound of breathing from our captive especially loud.

I began fleshing out my idea and considered its viability.

Back when I was working on cybernetics for the volleyball team, I lamented the fact that our company was lacking in knowledge in many disciplines. It slowed down my progress on completing a set of cybernetics, as we had to slowly research the areas we were lacking in. A cybernetic that performed to my satisfaction would require something extra besides having high specifications. It really showed me why the only companies who had a complete set of cybernetics so far were the big players.

We were an upstart, and not enough time had passed to build up our foundation. The academic knowledge other corporations treasured was built upon through generations, careful scheming, and backroom dealings. All of these things took time, connections, and money.

In the past, I had fantasized about infiltrating other corporations to steal all their knowledge. It would save me from wasting my precious upgrade points on all the other disciplines of science I was missing.

However, that was a rabbit hole I didn't want to go down as it would inevitably lead to more enemies. After all, there was no way to hide the fact it was us responsible unless we didn't make use of the stolen information at all. But that would mean there was no point in stealing it in the first place.

Developing or hiring personnel to expand our knowledge base was something we had always tried to do, but it wasn't a solution that could address our short-term needs. I would need to create my own schools like the other corporations, and then wait for students to go through the entire curriculum to become useful.

I could use the hypnopedia cassettes to speed things up, but then again, I would need the knowledge in the first place to do so.

Trading with other corporations was possibly the best idea of the bunch to attain the academic knowledge we desire. Especially with the new connections I could form now that I had been invited to at least one party in the high society, but again, that took time and careful diplomacy to manage. I also wouldn't attain the best from this method, as corporations tended to keep the best for themselves.

Now that escape from the city was not likely, I began to plan for a different kind of scenario than what I was used to. A scenario I had dreaded since I had come to this world, but the conditions were different now.

I had to decide if I wanted to gamble on the goodwill of someone I didn't know. On the goodwill of the mysterious actor who had saved my life once already. However, this time, they would have to go up against one of the top corporations that was at least an A-Class entity.

"You!" I broke the silence and yelled at our captive. "Which corporation are you from?"

"...I can't say. They'll kill me if they knew I had such a loose mouth."

"I'll kill you now if you don't loosen your mouth."

"..."

The man's expression changed every second as he struggled with what I presumed to be the biggest dilemma in his life. Seeing this, I decided to give it a little push. The information I valued was more of their capabilities rather than exactly who they were, anyway.

"Look, you can keep the name to yourself. Just answer me, how big is your corporation? How many people are after us?"

"That...I'm not sure exactly how to answer. What I can say is... that I'm from an A-Class corporation. It's not a good idea to kill me because you won't be able to escape. As for how many of us are pursuing you....I have no idea. They only sent us, but now that we've failed, they would have to organize another team." I glared at him for several seconds before he continued. "I swear I don't know anything more. We never thought my team would fail in the first place, so I didn't ask anything else!"

So an A-Class corp. That is at least on the lower end of what I was warned about...but still...Am I really willing to bet on my mysterious guardian angel to save me from an A-Class corporation?

They did warn me to prioritize surviving at any cost and bide my time for now. But how can I be sure this enemy corporation won't change its mind and kill me before I'm saved?

...At the end of the day, this is all a gamble.

"Are you still in contact with your superiors right now?" I directed a pointed glance at my captive.

"No, no. Of course not. Not even we can overcome the jamming coming from these restraining devices."

"But if I took them off, you could call for them, right?"

"I...Yes...But I wouldn't dare."

"Rollo, we can't be too sure. They might have some advanced tracker we couldn't detect within him somewhere." Claire warned. "It may be safer...to dispose of him."

“That won’t stop their second wave from coming. I’m all ears if you have any ideas to get us out of this city.”

“...Lucy is trying, but there aren’t many transports not under surveillance. They’re working under the assumption that they have access to the entire network in the city. Leo and Lana have already begun to isolate our company network from any external influences, too.”

“...Should I call for reinforcements?” Thorne interjected. “Maybe we can break through somehow and jack an aircraft capable of transcontinental travel or something. Our VTOL can help us assault an airfield.”

The inexperience from dealing with something as powerful as an A-Class corporation was painfully on display from their suggestions. We had relied on brute forcing too often, whether it be by stealth, violence, or cybersecurity.

I was sure all of us knew none of these methods had a good chance of success, not without receiving retaliation against our fixed assets that we couldn’t afford, but we simply didn’t know how else to handle the situation.

All this began to make me lean towards my risky plan more and more.

Depending on how I negotiated things, I could have our company get out of this unscathed.

Based on all the intel we had so far, the enemy corporations only acted out because my guardian angel was busy. They wouldn’t want to kill me unless new developments happened. I believed the reason they even wanted to get to me was to get info out of me.

Whoever my guardian angel was, they must be even more powerful than an A-Class corporation.

But if that is the case, why was my guardian distracted so easily? ...Wouldn’t they keep these rivals of theirs in check before they left to deal with whatever it is that kept them occupied?

No...corporations at this level didn’t operate like us. They must have numerous more considerations to make and dozens of lackeys to order around. The people after me could be one of their secret vassals for all I know. Heck, it was more likely than the enemy taking action directly.

I felt my mind heat up as I considered the problem from different angles. If my assumptions were true, this complicated conspiracy might be more multi-layered than I initially thought. If there was one weakness, I knew from over-bloated organizations; it was that they often played a game of broken telephone as stuff went down the chain of command.

The corpo in charge of my capture should not know the full context of anything and simply ordered to take me in alive. The rest was at his discretion.

I adjusted the restraining devices and had them deafen my captive as I moved to physically blind and gag him.

“Guys...” I said as I let out a deep sigh. “I have a plan, but I don’t think any of you will like it.”

“We’re on the cusp of a game over. What is there to not like? Just say it,” Claire quipped.

“I plan to negotiate with the enemy corporation. They want to capture me and I plan to comply in exchange for leaving our company alone.”

“What?! That’s crazy!” Thorne yelled. “You think they’re just going to let you go after your so-called guardian angel returns? Even if he wants to save you, they could just execute you if they act.”

Claire nodded at his words and continued to team up against me.

“Yeah...I don’t think they’re doing all this just to invite you over for a chat, Rollo. Our victory condition is to have you survive, away from our enemies until your savior comes running. All this stuff going on is way over our heads.”

“Guys, listen to me. The enemy’s goal should be to interrogate me, not kill me. If they’re acting so cautiously to avoid getting me killed, it must be because they’re afraid of my guardian’s response. If they’re so afraid, it must mean my guardian is much more powerful than them. Remember my conversation with Titus? I have to endure. If I can’t run, I’d rather endure being a prisoner while keeping the company and you guys safe.

What I didn’t mention was how I planned to convince my captor to work for them instead. I could play the role of a submissive street rat turned corpo, reveal everything I know, and offer my services as a researcher to them. Then I could use the opportunity to soak in all the knowledge they provide me with while I bide my time, killing two birds with one stone.

“Besides, if anything went wrong, I’m confident I could escape myself. Our stealth tech should be a lot more advanced than what they have if they’re only an A-Class corporation. It’s just that if we keep running, they’d start targeting our fixed assets, so we can’t have that. I’ll let them believe they have me captive,” I supplemented my reasoning.

We continued to argue for several more minutes before they came to the realization that it was the least bad plan we had. In the first place, if negotiations didn’t go through, we could just then go with one of their drastic last resorts.

“...”

With that settled, I began to free my prisoner of his restraints.

“You just need to tell them I wish to talk with them about your release, okay?”

“Yes, yes. Of course! My dad will surely listen to your demands in exchange for my life.” The man said as he received the terminal I handed him.

It only took him a moment to place the call through it, and I took the handheld terminal back. It was better to speak over a terminal rather than my optics because I didn't want to take the chance of getting remotely hacked somehow. You could never be too safe when dealing with these powerful corporations.

“This is Rollo Halls. Who am I speaking to?”

“Mr. Halls! Just the person we wanted to see. Now tell me, do you want to do this the hard way or the easy way?”

I have to get them to believe they had me cornered and lower their guard around me. As long as they don't dissect me to inspect my cybernetics, what I have should be able to slip around them whenever I want.