

# Chapter 124: Research & The Grind

## Drew - Halls Corporation

“Hey Drew, how’s it going?” A thin and short man greeted as he slammed his tray of food down onto the table.

“Derek. You know how it is...” Drew sighed at having remembered his day. “If the customers aren’t annoying to deal with, then they wouldn’t have become our responsibility. Got an equal amount of Karens and scammers trying their luck. How about you?”

“Ha, they just recently let me go solo, so I don’t have it as bad as you, yet.”

Drew couldn’t help but flash a bittersweet smile at the newcomer, who was busy slurping away at his bowl of ramen.

“Enjoy it while it lasts.”

The rookie looked up at Drew’s words and replied while still chewing on his food.

“What did—you say?”

“...Nothing, slow down and enjoy your food. We still have a long day ahead of us.”

“I can’t help it. It’s so good.”

After lunch, the duo headed the same way back to their department’s office together to accept their next assignments. They separated as Drew reached his office first.

“My stop is here. See you later, Derek. Oh, and do you want to go out for dinner with the other guys after work?”

The petite man smiled wryly at the question.

“I’m sorry, I want to save up as much credits as I can, so I’ll pass.”

“Hmm? Our pay should be pretty decent. You saving for a big purchase?”

“No, no. People who don’t come from a corpo background like me still need to watch how we spend. Now that I’m in a good position, I need to send as much as I can back to my family. It’s not easy for normal folks to survive in this city.”

“Okay, maybe next time, then. See you.”

Drew cut the conversation short and waved as the rookie walked away. His family had been corporos for generations, and he didn’t know what to say about the newcomer’s family situation,

as it was completely foreign to him. And one thing that was ingrained in him was to not speak when he didn't know what to say.

Instead, he refocused his energy on dealing with the next case. He opened up his terminal and logged into his company account to browse through all the pending cases.

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I performed yet another scan with my Argus and this time; it produced results. We had been driving around these ruins in search of mutants for a while now, so it was satisfying to finally find some prey.

"Everyone, watch my back as usual. Don't step in."

I quickly received a 'Roger that' from all my guards except one who shrugged.

I avoided Thorne's gaze and exited the Wraith as soon as it came to a stop. The sound of the wind howling immediately intensified, but thankfully, the mask I wore shielded my face from the sandstorm of the wasteland.

We walked out into an open area between several buildings, which likely was a former park, and we quickly spotted our targets.

There were several lumps of sand before us, but our Argus gave us a clear outline of their bodies that were beneath the sand. I fetched my SMG from my back and Kiri automatically tracked onto the targets for me.

Once it was done, I held down the trigger and swept the weapon across all my targets. As soon as I fired, the lumps of sand rose before it fell off to the side, revealing round shells. My bullets quickly corrected their trajectories in mid-flight and all landed true to their targets, but the sudden movement of the creatures had veered the projectiles off their target, hitting their shells instead.

Thanks to my system, I knew I had only landed one fatal shot.

+20 EXP
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The tortoise mutants all turned in my direction and began charging us, recognizing us as threats.

"You need some help there?" Thorne's voice rang out from beside me.

I ignored it and swiftly loaded a new mag before firing again. This time, the mutants were ready, and they immediately retreated into their shells. My attacks bounced harmlessly off them, but it also meant they were now immobile.

I pulled out my Suri and fired it off at the stationary targets. The subsonic rounds were fired without a noise, delivering my attack silently. I unloaded my entire clip, resulting in multiple explosions from my explosive rounds.

+20 EXP  
+20 EXP  
+20 EXP  
+20 EXP

Unfortunately, the capacity of the pistol magazine was limited, and I ran out of bullets before I finished off all my enemies.

The surviving tortoises took the opportunity while I switched my weapons yet again to close the distance.

“Everyone, Shade out!” Thorne yelled out as the mutants approached.

I did the same as the rest of my team and activated my active camouflage. We then made some distance, retreating back toward the skyscraper where our vehicles were.

The mutant desert tortoises weren't to be trifled with up close. Their jaws were ridiculously strong, being able to bite through our armored vehicles with ease. If it was just that, it would still be manageable, but their tails also gave off a corrosive gas that could quickly damage our equipment. It simply wasn't worth it to fight one up close.

The mutants charged toward the empty space where we once were before coming to a stop, sniffing the air.

Once we were an adequate distance away from the threats, I pulled out my railgun pistol and placed careful shots at the mutants. Even with my armor-piercing rounds, I doubt it could penetrate their tough shells, but the supersonic projectile speed allowed my shots to hit their mark before my enemies could react from the sound.

+20 EXP

At the end of the day, the mutants acted on instincts like animals, and they repeated their actions of retreating into their shells. That allowed me to rinse and repeat my strategy to pick them off.

There was a reason why these tortoises were one of my favorite prey throughout the wasteland. They were frequently found in flat areas where I could easily abuse our ranged weapons to take them out safely, without having to worry about them jumping out at me like in urban environments. They also provided twenty experience points each.

*If only they were more common.*

Once we finished them off, we swiftly harvested the useful parts from their remains, which were mainly their shells, and made off back to our outpost.

Our presence in the wasteland had grown with our recent expansion. It wasn't just our head office that received an upgrade. We extensively expanded all our assets, including our wasteland outposts. With our increasing profits, we needed to prepare to fight off any greedy opportunists and protect our wealth.

We were sure the High Gate Group had spared no effort of tracking our assets, and even with the ceasefire, there was no telling if they would sell off their information to third parties to indirectly retaliate against us.

We soon arrived and closely examined the fortified gate to our outpost while we waited for it to open. It was a man-made cave we had excavated, and we had placed a sturdy gate equipped with various turrets. Besides the defense measures I could see from here, there was also an entirely new section above the cliff, preventing our enemies from blowing a hole above our heads.

While this place would have definitely looked impressive and intimidating to the old me who had just come into the wasteland, it was still nothing compared to the fortifications we had enacted where our mine was. The value of that place was just that much higher, but this outpost was still a better base to operate out of for my purposes.

As soon as we arrived, our team dispersed with well-practiced movements, leaving the onsite personnel to deal with our haul. Some of my team would go have meals, while some would go rest. As for me, I would retreat back into the new workshop I had set up here to continue my work.

I had made good progress with most of the tedious programming out of the way. There was still a whole database I needed to fill, but I could only do that outside the wasteland where we had connections to our data centers.

That was why I had started up another project concurrently, to make more effective use of my time, and allowed me to take a break from tunneling on only one project.

I walked through my spacious workshop, past a bulky military vehicle to where my terminal was. The contours of my vehicle shared a semblance with a tank. While having a tank may be a good idea, the other corpos would never authorize us to bring it into the cities where it could cause widespread collateral damage.

It was much preferable to employ power armors, which was why I was working on an armored personnel carrier. The Wraiths were great at what they did, but in all our deployments, they proved to be clunky during our assaults. We needed dozens of them, as each only held four or five people.

In urban warfare, we couldn't muster out an assault force quickly enough when using so many vehicles in crowded streets, which was why I copied what the other corporations had done during the war.

They employed APCs that could carry over a dozen soldiers. That was just the cherry on top because their main use was to carry an entire squadron of power armor. They could even be used as mobile power armor workshops for urgent repairs and as a resupply station.

"Hey Rollo, don't forget to eat!" Thorne's voice rang out as I was working on the new design.

He placed a plate full of food and stood directly in front of me.

"Come on. This is the real stuff from the ingredients we shipped in. Eat before it gets cold."

"Yeah, yeah. Whatever you say, Claire."

"..."

We both locked eyes with each other for a moment before we both burst out into laughter.

"Anyway, did you check in with our production crew back in NLA to see if the vehicle is done?"

"The prototype or the racecar?"

"The racecar. I've tested the prototype of the new Wraith thoroughly already. They just need to work out the production and the update facilities."

"I think the drivers were saying how too many features were automated and were asking for a way to set some of them to manual."

*Must be all the work on the AI influencing me to automate everything...*

"...That should just be a quick software update, then. If they're ready, let's head back tomorrow morning, so we can see it in action."

"We can head back tonight if you want. There's a convoy scheduled to come in from Salt Lake soon."

"Right, sure."

As we slowly expanded our transportation capacity to fill in the hole QuickLinks had left, we were able to expand the frequency of our convoys. The logistics business only grew faster the more we became known as an established player.

We soon joined our convoy, heading back out into civilization, into our new head office of the NNA branch. Different from the warehouse we had made use of previously, we had built a

proper office building on the adjacent plot of land. It was five stories, like our old headquarters, and had a similar layout.

We turned into the underground garage of the building while the rest of the convoy entered the warehouse next door. When we got off, we found Vin standing, surrounded by his entourage.

*It sure made him look like a big shot...Well...I guess he is one within our company.*

“Hey Vin, is everything going okay?” I asked as I placed a hand on his shoulder.

“...”

He didn’t reply immediately.

“What is it? Come on, spit it out.”

“...We’re still looking into it, but there have been rumors going around saying we’ve been selling defective products.”