

Chapter 37: Getting Out

Surveying my surroundings, I found the fall had only brought me one floor below the ground level. It was on the top floor of the supermarket where we escaped from the rudents, the mutant rats. I spotted the bottom of the stairway that led back up, and it was completely blocked off with debris.

My comms couldn't reach Vin anymore as we were too far apart because he went back with the injured.

Now then, let's see if I can get out of here before he returns. I'd rather not have them try to come down only to sustain more injuries. While it was common practice to not pay if they didn't work, one selling point of the contracts I offered was the adequate worker's compensation agreement within the terms of employment.

With the way up blocked off, the only remaining exit was back down, where all the mutant rats were.

Once I recollected myself, I moved down the stairs and tried to be as quiet as possible. They were a bunch of junk we threw down the staircase when we retreated, that I had to move out of the way. I just had to be careful where I stepped or else the noise may alert the nearby rats.

When I finally made it to the bottom floor of the grocery store, I found it eerily quiet. I made my way out of the store and back onto the main pathway of the underground shopping street and it was just as silent as it was in the store.

It hasn't even been that long since we dumped bullets into a horde of mutant rats and there are no longer any traces of it...

Not wanting to stay to find out what had wiped the place clean, I headed back to the tunnel we descended from, but as Vin had mentioned, the tunnel had collapsed as well.

The sound of something kicking a bottle suddenly echoed beside me and I reflexively turned on my active camouflage. Snapping toward the direction of the sound, the night vision from my optics clearly outlined a rat on its two rear legs, sniffing at the air.

Give me a break...While I'm not visible, I do not doubt it can detect the blood from my wound even though it had dried. I really needed to upgrade my stealth implant, at least the one I personally use.

I drew my Suri and shot at the rat before he could track my smell.

Maybe because it was dead silent down here, my gun produced a much louder sound than I had expected. From all around, I started to hear something scuttling around in the darkness.

I picked a direction and started running down the pathway. I needed to get out of here before my camouflage gave out. On the way, I started seeing more mutant rats sniffing around, but they only scanned in my direction in confusion, as they couldn't see anything there.

In my rush, I accidentally kicked a glass jar by my feet. Even though my boots killed any sound, it didn't help when the glass smashed into the nearby debris.

Instantly, I could hear lots of movement from behind me. I refused to look back and picked up my pace.

I continued to run even when my stealth went offline and ran until I felt the fatigue in my legs. I had augmented my cardiovascular system, so I wasn't easily winded, but my muscles were another case. Feeling myself slow down, I stole a glance behind me and found nothing there.

Now that I think about it, I couldn't hear them chase after me for a while now.

The surrounding area looked no different from before, with stores flanking both sides. This place must be huge because I was pretty confident I ran pretty far away.

An entrance to the basement of an office building came into view, along with a worn-out coffee shop by the entrance. The stairway up was blocked off but the escalators right beside it were mostly intact.

Pushing down my excitement, I cautiously climbed up to a small lobby with fancy turnstile gates and marble support pillars on both sides.

The smell of blood was thick in the area and I could see dried blood every few meters on the floor. There were even some damaged guns and terminals that lay scattered around, from the emblems on the gear. It was obvious it belonged to some corporation.

Not wanting to outstay my welcome, I climbed over the turnstile to find the area behind littered with light-colored ovals the size of bowling balls. The stairway at the end of the hall had sunlight shining down from the floor above. It also illuminated the weird things I saw on the ground.

Those are eggs... of what?

A sharp hiss sounded out from a corner behind me, and I swiftly turned towards it. Curled onto one of the pillars supporting the building was a giant snake that was as thick as my body. It could definitely swallow me whole.

It was staring straight at me as it let out yet another hiss.

It would really help if I could use my camouflage right now to avoid confronting it, but it needs more time to cool down and recharge. Damn it.

We stared at each other a short moment before we both moved at the same time. It lunged at me while I drew my pistol railgun and shot at it.

The only good thing about such an enormous snake was the massive target it provided and, with it charging toward me, it was hard to miss. The shot broke off one of its fangs, and the snake recoiled back as it hissed loudly.

Right when I saw it recoil back, I turned and ran behind the pillar on the opposite side of the room. With a solid cover in between us now, I peeked out to catch sight of it crawling between pillars.

Firing several shots into the snake, it hissed out in pain again, but otherwise seemed to be moving unhindered from the damage.

First the swarm of rats and now this, I need to add firearm shopping to my to-do list.

I changed my focus to escaping to the stairs leading up. Every time I stepped into the open, it made a charge at me. It feinted and dodged a shot, but I reloaded whenever I had the chance, so my next shots kept it at bay.

I made my way to the final pillar that was closest to the stairs. There was more than double the distance to it compared to the pillar-to-pillar I had traversed. I took a second to reload and gauged the situation.

While I took my time, the giant snake crossed over to my side and approached by weaving in and out of the pillars as cover. With its approach as a signal, I ran for the stairs while I took potshots at it.

I climbed the stairs as fast as I could, but my injured leg was slowing me down, going up at this rate. I wouldn't make it up before the snake caught up.

As I climbed, I made sure to keep my eyes on the snake. Just as it was about to lunge at me on the staircase, I forced on my camouflage and dove out of the way. It should have recovered enough for a few seconds.

The snake rammed into the handrail to the side where I was and came to a standstill when it didn't find me. It swiftly let out its tongue to taste the air in order to locate me, and it did. But it wasn't fast enough as I unloaded the rest of my clip into the mouth of the stationary target.

+50 EXP

I couldn't have been more relieved to see the experience notification. I allowed my legs to give out and plopped myself on the stairs.

I opened the status screen to confirm the new experience points I gained.

Status

Level:	11
EXP:	960/1100
Musculoskeletal:	76
Neural Reflex:	15
Visuomotor Coordination:	27
Endurance:	24
Sensory Perception:	52
Upgrade Points:	0
Upgrades:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Stealth +7 ● Hacking +3 ● Cybernetic Engineering +6 ● Stealth Technology +6 ● Software Engineering +4
Enhancements:	SAID: Zenitech Hoth Mk.3 Optics: Nova Tech Stars Mk.4 Cyberarm (Left): Nova Tech Mudra Mk.6 Cyberarm (Right): Nova Tech Shiva Mk.5 Auditory: Amazing Corp FieldTac Gen 2 Cardiovascular: BioGen Labs Marathon 4 Miscellaneous: HSU Custom Shade

I expected Vin to return soon, so I forced myself up after a short break and surveyed my surroundings to reorientate myself. I should still be in range for the comms, but it didn't hurt to be closer.

Upon reaching the ground level, I found all the doors and windows in the lobby were welded shut with metal plates. It had high ceilings towards the doorway as another floor above shared the same roof.

The windows higher up on the mezzanine had light coming through the glasses, so I made my way up another set of stairs. The windows at the front were too far to reach, but a quick survey of the floor allowed me to find a window by the elevators towards the back of the building.

I backtracked to grab a nearby chair and threw it toward the glass pane. It cracked with the chair rebounding back onto the ground. I picked it up and continued to throw it at the window, and on the sixth throw, the glass gave way, allowing a part of the chair to stick out on the other side.

Thankfully, my arms were prosthetics and didn't tire. I pried the chair out of the window and smashed it a few more times until it had an opening that I could comfortably fit through.

Carefully clinging on, I lowered myself slowly before making the one-story high jump down. I tried to do a roll to disperse the force as I landed, but I clumsily fell to my side as my injured leg gave out on the landing.

Gaining a new scrape on my knees, I made my way back onto the main street.

The streets felt desolate without any life in sight, but I spotted some movement from within the nearby buildings.

I really do not want to encounter any more mutants or anything.

On the side of the street near the building that I came out of, there was a flipped-over vehicle that looked like a more advanced version of our Vanguard's. It was heavily damaged, so I couldn't make out its affiliation, but it didn't take a genius to realize its value. The only issue was how to transport the precious salvage back.

"---there?" Static suddenly rang out from my comms with a familiar voice that could be made out toward the end.

Well, that solves the issues of transportation.

I promptly replied, "Hey, I'm still alive and kicking over here. Can you read where I am from the signal? I have something over here we should drag back with us."

"You really should expand our team and invest in our equipment more if you're complaining about the hazard pay you set."

"Yeah yeah, I know, that's why I'm going back now. You're running a tight ship here without me. Time to make some sales once the products are shipped back."

"You don't plan on opening any clinics here yet?" Vin raised an eyebrow.

"Not right now, will have to wait for things to settle back in Elevate City before I even have the resources and money to expand so far," I shrugged.

"I see. Well, have a safe flight. I still want my paychecks, so try not to get killed." Vin grinned and gave me a quick hug.

"You too. I'll be back soon. We'll stay in touch."

I arrived at the boarding gate just as the final call started. The flight was pleasant as I slept through its entirety. The fatigue from my recent escapades must have been catching up to me.

The view of Elevate City as we landed was breathtaking, as always. It was hard to imagine the sheer amount of people that lived in this concrete jungle.

When I exited the airport, I found the familiar faces of Thorne and Claire waiting by my car. As I walked up, Claire leaped at me while Thorne followed slightly behind her.

“Welcome back!” She said as she hugged me.

“I’m back. Hope everything was okay while I was gone?” I smiled at the two of them. We kept in touch while I was in NLA, but almost all of their updates were the same, stating that they had everything under control.

Thorne gazed downward and scratched his cheeks, “Mostly yea, but we just got ourselves a competitor within the last eight hours. Yesterday, some small-time corp launched a similar chrome to ours...they beat us to the punch.”