

Chapter 86: Hacking Skills

I woke up later than usual in recent times, as I had ventured out last night with Thorne.

Once we finished our gig, we still had to bring the girl to a safe location where we contacted the QG, Oli. We couldn't use Fitel as it was too likely he would spot through my fake persona, Cloak, so we used the other QG we were familiar with.

It was honestly quite fun being treated as a mercenary again. It was like taking part in a stage play where I acted out a character too. Though, I doubt I would still be happy with it if it lasted longer than a day.

Once I showered and finished breakfast, I sat down at my office and dimmed the glass dividers for some privacy before I opened my status.

Status	
Level:	21
EXP:	20/2100
Musculoskeletal:	211
Neural Reflex:	65
Visuomotor Coordination:	87
Endurance:	59
Sensory Perception:	127
Upgrade Points:	2
Upgrades:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Stealth +7● Hacking +3● Cybernetic Engineering +10● Stealth Technology +10● Software Engineering +6● Electrical Engineering +8
Enhancements:	SAID: Zenitech Sebastien v2 Optics: Mirage Tech Clear-Sights mk.12 Cyberarm (Left): Nova Tech Heracle Mk. 3 Cyberarm (Right): Nova Tech Heracle Mk. 3 Auditory: SocialCorp Echo IV Vocal: SocialCorp Orator III Cardiovascular: BioGen Lifepump 5

	Additional Processing: Halls Corp Custom ST Miscellaneous: Halls Corp HSU Custom Shade
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Our gig last night successfully allowed me to level up, and I received my two long-awaited upgrade points. The original plan was to put them into electrical engineering to finish rounding it off, and I could then make another pass at our vehicles too.

However, this war with QuickLinks Logistics was hindering our growth and costing us money every day it went on. Ending this battle was much more urgent for us, so I took the plunge and threw my two valuable points at the skill I had neglected since the start, hacking.

As it had been with stealth, the rush of information that flooded into me was different from the other skills that provided knowledge. My instincts, intuition, thinking process, and reflexes felt like they had all changed within an instant.

I took a moment to confirm my new status.

Status	
Level:	21
EXP:	20/2100
Musculoskeletal:	211
Neural Reflex:	65
Visuomotor Coordination:	87
Endurance:	59
Sensory Perception:	127
Upgrade Points:	0
Upgrades:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Stealth +7 ● Hacking +5 ● Cybernetic Engineering +10 ● Stealth Technology +10 ● Software Engineering +6 ● Electrical Engineering +8
Enhancements:	SAID: Zenitech Sebastien v2 Optics: Mirage Tech Clear-Sights mk.12 Cyberarm (Left): Nova Tech Heracle Mk. 3 Cyberarm (Right): Nova Tech Heracle Mk. 3 Auditory: SocialCorp Echo IV

	Vocal: SocialCorp Orator III Cardiovascular: BioGen Lifepump 5 Additional Processing: Halls Corp Custom ST Miscellaneous: Halls Corp HSU Custom Shade
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Thinking back to the hacking exercise I did yesterday, I could start seeing areas I could try to exploit. Though, it wasn't that easy. When there is a cy-sec specialist on the other end defending a system, the defenses would constantly evolve to keep you at bay.

I made my way to the elevator and pressed the button for the floor where the security control room was. I walked past several employees who stood to salute me, but I was too eager to try my hand at hacking that I ignored them and beelined for Leo and Lana.

"Good morning, you two. Can we redo the test from yesterday now?"

Leo glanced at Lana, who sighed. "Fine. You're paying us for our time anyway, so it's up to you to waste it too."

Leo smiled weakly at me and shrugged before his eyes lit up as he focused on the terminal before him.

Lana took a few moments to set it up on her terminal before she gestured for me to plug into it.

"I won't be participating directly today. We had another cy-sec specialist take the defensive role so they won't know about your breaching attempts. Try not to get noticed—not that you can."

Once I was connected, I began breaching into the network she had pulled up on her terminal again. This time, when I ran into the security, I didn't get entirely stumped. It was as if I studied before the exam, and I could intuitively tell what the question was asking for before reading through it entirely.

Even then, I didn't rush into it and steadily compiled a new program on my custom internal terminal I had previously installed. Once I was done, I gave it another pass and optimized it to be as compact as possible.

I allowed the program to start infiltrating the network as I made real-time changes to it in order to fine-tune how it handled the firewall's reactions.

When I was halfway done, the entire defense completely changed again, just like yesterday.

It's only been ten minutes...Last time, this didn't happen until half an hour.

Even though the board was flipped, I could still come up with ways to bypass it after some investigating. As I began breaching into it again, I could feel the firewall actively responding much better than before to my attacks.

So this is what it's like to breach a network that is actually manned.

It wasn't doing a complete change like before though, only minor changes that kept delaying me. As I got used to my new skill, I slowly sped up while my opponent seemed to be slowing down.

I could feel myself overwhelming the defenses, and before long, I won.

Immediately upon gaining access to the network, it shut down and my connection was cut off.

I looked up to find Lana turning her entire body toward me. "...That was actually not bad. How did you improve so much overnight?"

"Yeah, you did really well. Were you even trying yesterday?" Leo added his question to the list.

"...I had used a new hypnopaedia implant with the right cassette. Don't worry too much about it." I said as I kept up my poker face. "Anyway, do you think that I'm good enough to infiltrate QuickLink's headquarters now if we have you guys distracting their cy-sec specialists?"

The two shared a glance before Leo answered. "It's hard to say for sure, but you definitely have a good chance."

"Great, we'll take a shot at it then."

"Again, I emphasize, chance. Be sure to have a good getaway plan if things go south."

"Of course."

A few days later, we finished hashing out a plan, and I made my way to the NNA continent.

It was a tiring ordeal simply because I had to argue with the faction that didn't want me to go to the front lines. I successfully convinced them when I demonstrated my newfound hacking skills that would be vital to the plan.

They were all smart enough to realize that prolonging this wasn't good for business or anyone, really. And they knew this plan to infiltrate their headquarters to take out their leadership would be the most efficient method for us.

Our allies from the West Coast Agroindustry, led by Joey, agreed they would utilize everything they had to finish off the remnants out of our reach if we succeeded in our decapitation strike.

Although that meant they wouldn't make a move if we failed. They justified it by saying we would be gaining QuickLinks Logistics's entire route if we succeeded, so we were the ones who had to put our necks out on the line for our potential gains.

“Rollo and Thorne,” Vin said, “can’t say I didn’t expect you two to miss the party.”

The veteran welcomed us with open arms as we exited out of the airport, escorted by a convoy of Wraiths.

“Let’s talk on the way. You have everything ready, right?”

“Of course,” He scoffed.

It wasn’t hard to track my movement, especially when I took a flight. That was why we planned to have the convoy here head directly for Miles High after faking a return trip to our office for any prying eyes.

This was accomplished by using the new vehicle-grade Shade I named Specter that I had created while were devising our plans. It was expensive to the point where the active camouflage system cost as much as the car itself, with all the nanomachines that were required to cover one car. It did have a much longer uptime, though, with more space for batteries. Still, it was only useful on roads, or else the tracks would give it away.

It wasn’t as easy as I had thought to get out of the city; we had to ensure we didn’t go too fast lest the curious investigate the fast-moving vehicles that could be picked up on their sensors. We also had to dodge the other vehicles who couldn’t see us. Even with those delays, the new stealth device easily had enough uptime for us to drive out of the city.

The excitement of sneaking out of the city soon dialed down as the boring ride through the wasteland started.

“I pulled all the best men we had for this mission to be on standby in case the infiltration doesn’t work,” Vin said. “Are you sure you’re fine with just Andrew’s team and Thorne?”

Andrew and Peng, huh? It’s kind of ironic seeing them on the elite team considering they were no good teenagers, roped into a gang not that long ago...Well, that same could be said about me, though.

“Yeah, the six of us are already too large. The more of us, the easier it’ll be for us to be spotted,” I answered.

“Well, they’ll be swarming the place, on full alert the moment we have Leo and his geeks start their cyber attack.”

“They should be focused on reinforcing the outside of their base for an attack, since Leo will be targeting their E-Dome. We should be fine.”

“...If things often went as planned. Be sure to keep the flare gun close. We’ll be ready if you need us.”

I spent the time riding through the sand by going through the plan. There were many things that I could see going wrong, but not enough that we couldn't handle it. Whether it be by luck or not, we safely crossed the wasteland after several days of traveling through the night without any mutant encounters.

The moment we exited the wasteland, I could spot a mountain looming over the metropolis that was our destination. Even though the sun was still out, I could see the glow of neon lights the city gave off in the backdrop.

We quickly split off into smaller groups and dispersed into the city before we drew attention to ourselves. Only Andrew's car was in my group as we made our way toward the QuickLinks Logistic headquarters.

"Sir, follow my lead. We've been here before." Andrew's voice rang out on our comms.

He soon let us into an alleyway near our goal, where we all disembarked and readied our gear.

"You good to carry it alone?" I asked Thorne, who was carrying a terminal the size of a mini fridge out of the car.

"Yeah, but you sure we're not going to be instantly spotted with this thing?"

"...Your Shade should be able to cover it if it can cover you. We'll find someone discreet to place it and have someone guard it. We just need it plugged into their system somewhere so Leo and them get their connection."

We swiftly turned on our active camouflage the moment we left the alley as Andrew traced the path he had previously taken to get into their headquarters.

The entire compound was walled off, with two sets of gates at the front where turrets and defensive emplacements were visible in a display of power. I could barely make out what was behind the gates, a spacious parking lot that was surrounded by buildings on three sides.

I took a deep breath and spoke out into our team comms.

"Are you guys all ready?"