

Chapter 188: Decoy

The construction of our first hidden base didn't take as long as I had thought. The lengthy part was surveying for a spot with a stable foundation to dig into. The entire place was set up in short order after that, making use of habitat modules to set up the initial framework of the facility.

They would then replace these modular units with proper materials, such as reinforced concrete.

However, even when that was done, the furnishing and equipment assembly was an ongoing process. We couldn't ship everything out at once. We needed to hide the flow of materials, to prevent alerting any other parties or allowing them to trace us down.

The irregular logistics tied down the entire project.

While the basic framework was set up, it would take yet another month before the facility was ready. That was why I returned to Elevate City once everything was in order.

As my guardian angel had said, time was a luxury. I needed to expand rapidly to keep up with my enemies. No one knew how long I had. It could be a month, a year, or even a decade.

The construction of a brand-new base was both lengthy and resource-intensive. It couldn't be compared with buying an existing house or office building that was ready to go. Despite our best efforts to hide this activity, any perceptive parties would realize something was up. It was inevitable some people would know we were shifting our investments into the wasteland.

That was why I had planned to use our wasteland hidden base as a diversion.

Arriving in Elevate City, I quickly ordered an auto cab. Thorne and I arrived inside one of the largest megabuildings in the city. This particular complex was located in District Two, the same district where our headquarters was.

On the outside, the place known as The Burrow only appeared average in size among megabuildings. It was known as one of the largest, not for its height, but its depth. It was built over the initial island that Elevate City was built around.

This allowed them to set up over fifty floors underground. While the lower levels were exotic, their rent and quality of living deteriorated the further down it went.

It wasn't surprising from a resident's standpoint. There was no sunlight, and the air quality was subpar. It was also humid and made one feel confined. It was not the ideal residence.

The low worth of these properties meant the less upstanding citizens took hold of the lower floors. Gangs and criminals ran rampant down there. The corporation in charge rarely cared about them lest they threaten the building's security.

We got out of the taxi and found a middle-aged man with a face full of tattoos standing in a corner. We walked straight up to him and we exchanged nods.

“Is the place ready?” I asked.

Contrary to the man’s appearance, he nodded and answered amiably.

“Yeah. It’s not clean, but it’s usable.”

“...I thought you guys took this place for over a month now. Shouldn’t you clean it up before we bring our equipment in?”

“No, we purposely left it as it was. Members from other gangs come to take a peek sometimes. They’re like vultures, searching for weakness. It’s better if we don’t draw their attention.”

“Then a lot of the space is being wasted.”

“It’s fine. We just left the main area around the elevators and stairs. Our projection technology can create a convincing background to fill in the rest. Those scumbags don’t dare come too close to our territory anyway.”

I nodded, and we began to walk over to the elevators. There were other people nearby, so we kept silent during the entire ride down.

It was only after we exited the elevator and found no one else around that we resumed our conversation. We talked as we walked down a rundown hallway with cold metal walls covered in colorful graffiti.

“We automated most of the defenses around here, as we only have a few trustworthy guards that are allowed here,” the middle-aged man informed.

“How do you define trustworthy?”

“Beats me,” he shrugged. “Ask Thorne.”

Being put on the spot, the cyborg cleared his throat as he thought up a reply.

“We carefully vet the background of those who’ve been with us for many years and have risked their life for the company. And remember? We had you give us access to their records, where we examined every detailed aspect of their lives while they were under our employment.

“Right. I did sign off on that before I left.”

“I do have to say that I never knew the company software could spy on so much.”

It didn’t. It was from the confidential implant I had installed for all my employees. But, I’ll keep that to myself. I’d rather not have one of these guys leak it by accident.

“Yeah, Leo and Lana had been insistent on the monitoring aspect of the program. They said it barely meets the standard of a proper corporation.”

The three of us soon walked past a second of the hallway when our vision suddenly distorted. The musty corridor that looked like it was falling apart suddenly became bright and pristine. It was as if we had traveled back in time to when this place was just built.

Standing before us was a large set of white double doors. I walked straight toward the terminal and plugged into it. Within a few seconds, the gates opened.

The moment the three of us walked in, we each deactivated our Shades. The holographic projection that disguised us as civilians was instantly shut down. Immediately, Claire wrapped her hand around both our shoulders.

“You two sure have gotten pretty creative in the ways you offload your work to me. Do you have anything to say?”

“...Claire, we—”

A stern glare silenced Thorne.

“Don’t bullshit me now. I know I regularly cover for you guys while you’re gone, but tell me who came up with the idea to dump everything on while you guys got the comfy job as decoys? It wasn’t easy securing this place and bringing in our equipment, you know!”

“It was me,” I confidently stated, despite averting eye contact with the woman before me.

“Oh, in that case, since you’re my boss, I won’t be able to complain too much. I’ll just have to be satisfied with a bonus and a long vacation. Isn’t that right?”

I felt the thorn in her words at that last bit. I instinctively nodded to avoid a catastrophe.

The three of us then exchanged glances in silence for a few moments before we all let out a chuckle at the same time. We all knew the conversation was just banter, and we were each used to our roles by now. It felt like the banter was tradition, and it was nice to see not everything had changed.

“Anyway, you said you got the mainframe hardware down here, right? Let’s plug it in first and let Lanus get to work. Then you can tell us all about the ordeal you went through.”

“You’ll have to get us some takeout from The Moon first, though. It was a pain dealing with this place where there was no food delivery.”

I agreed to all her snarky demands as we walked up to the mainframe room that would serve as Lanus’ new home. I knew it was justified. I asked a lot of her, and these trivial compensations were the least I could do.

Now then, let's take a tour of this place. After all, it's going to serve as my actual main facility for the foreseeable future.

Claire - Halls Corporation

During the time when Rollo and Thorne were out in the wasteland, Claire was secretly carrying out their plan. The directive she received was simply to create a hidden base for them while they were gone. There weren't any other details.

She fretted over what locations would work, sorting out a list of requirements. Rollo had mentioned he would enhance the security of the facility later, and Claire knew he wanted to host their AI in this new place. That meant adequate access to power, and to the network was required.

To blend in, it would preferably be a place with a lot of foot and network traffic as well. That was why she immediately investigated several megabuildings and their surroundings.

"Most of your requirements aren't too tough. Pretty much all the megabuildings fit them," Lucy said as she stared at her screen.

"But?" Claire urged.

"But finding such a large space discreetly too isn't something easy. It wouldn't be feasible to buy several apartments and knock down the walls, either. Just the financial transaction records from that alone would raise a few flags."

"Can't you do those spec op things where you blackmail someone or bribe them?"

"This isn't a TV show, Claire. Keeping someone's mouth shut isn't really reliable in the long term. People will notice something is off even if no one snitches."

"Then what? Megabuildings are a no-go?"

Lucy took a deep breath as she continued typing away on her terminal. A few moments later, she had it project an image of a megabuilding. The most notable thing about it was how a good chunk of the floors were underground.

"No-go if you're going through official channels. However, at The Burrow shown here, there are some places you can secure."

"Secure?"

Lucy didn't reply and simply sent over a file for Claire to review. It didn't take long for her to read it over. Her eyes widened at the new information.

“This is just fighting with the gangs for territory. We’ve had our episodes with harvesters. Do you really think we should go looking for trouble again?”

“Well, this fits what you asked for. That decision is up to you.”

Whether she liked it or not, Lucy was always busy with her work in the intel department. Claire watched on as she worked before realizing she could only rely on herself for this decision.

Sighing to herself, Claire made a few calls.

The security department quickly came up with several plans. Before she knew it, Claire had somehow convinced them to allow her to join. However, not without wearing power armor.

A squad of six other guards accompanied her. They all had a holographic projection to conceal their identity.

For this mission, they all took on the appearance of gruff men who would fit in with the gangs. They had many eye-catching cybernetics and tattoo marks all over their faces.

Having done their research, the team swiftly cut through the bustling market of the first floor. The residents there knew to steer clear of them when they entered the elevator. This made for a quick ride straight down to the sub-level thirty.

While they descended, a murky smell of filth seeped into their space. It was only a prelude to when the doors opened for good. A cloud of smoke filled their vision when the doors opened.

It didn’t take a genius to figure out how much the place was in need of maintenance. Things only got worse when they stepped out.

They spotted the locals, who were all listlessly sitting down everywhere. Their gaze was weak, but the sharp glint in their eyes never faded.

“CO—Chief. The people on this floor are separated into two major factions. Shouldn’t we set them against each other first before strolling into their area?” one guard asked.

“No, people aren’t dumb. It’d be a little too convenient that their fighting suddenly intensified, and we swoop in all of a sudden. I’d rather not have to deal with insurgents lurking around. We should try a more diplomatic approach. Otherwise, the fighting or people going missing will draw more attention than we want.”

“Diplomacy, ma’am...? Those gang bangers are tried-and-true killers, you know?”

“And so are we, right?”

This left the guard speechless, as he would rather not leave a bad impression on his superiors.

Claire stormed off, with her entourage following close behind. She didn't hesitate to pull one of the men lazing around aside. The poor man was half asleep, mumbling to himself. Claire's action had fully awoken him.

"You, how can we speak to the people in charge around here?"

Her straightforward and reckless question made all her guards gawk at the scene. Some of them wondered whether it was a good idea to bring along the eccentric COO. No matter their opinion, it was true to all parties that it was too late to stop her.