

Chapter 187: Hidden Bases

There was a lot to do now that I was back, but security was my priority. It was confirmed that we had come into the crosshairs of the big corporations. The ships that ferried me all the way from Ceres to Earth weren't stealth ships, so every competent corporation should have caught wind of something by now.

They may not know the details, but they likely had enough to put me on their watch list.

This meant I didn't want to dive straight into my expansion plan. The last thing I needed was for my research to be stolen and my AI to be discovered. I needed a completely secure location. Preferably, it would be mobile too, but that wasn't something easily set up in a short time.

That was why I decided to head out to NLA, to venture into the wastelands. There was a reason why none of the larger corporations had their real headquarters in Elevate City. Some do on paper, but their most important personnel were often absent. That was because they preferred to stay in more secure locations, like their own space stations.

Ferrumus Corp was like this, and even then, they had to regularly fend off raids from their competitors.

As much as I wanted to fortify a position into an impenetrable area, it was better to stick to something at which I excelled. Stealth.

Ideally, I would have a stealth ship that could move around, but for now, I settled for setting up hidden bases across the wasteland.

I retrieved my belongings from Claire, including the drives that stored Lanus and our core data to bring with me. The hardware would have to be shipped one piece at a time, but I had everything I needed to get started.

Once we landed in NLA, Thorne and I were quickly escorted to our branch office there. We wasted no time and called a meeting. It wasn't that big of a deal, though, with it just being between us and Vin.

"So you want to set up new bases out in the wasteland? You sure you don't want to just convert one of our current bases?" Vin asked calmly after listening to my explanation.

"No, they're too involved in our logistic network. It's easy to trace their location with all the vehicles that come and go through it. I want something more discreet, more isolated."

"In that case, we'll have to build something from the ground up. We'll have to do the same dance we did before and find a suitable location first. After all, the wasteland's inhospitable conditions make it hard to just construct it anywhere."

“Right...I assume all the best spots shielded from the sandstorm are already taken.”

“Well, the clans can tell you more, but yeah, all the ones near the city are taken by various corps.”

At his words, I thought back to the Wells Clan that I hadn't spoken with in a long time. If I wanted to set up a self-sustaining base with minimal contact with the outside world, there were no better experts to ask than the wastelanders themselves.

However, that brought on its own problems. From my knowledge, each clan was highly territorial. It was one thing to set up a trade route or a small outpost on their territory. Setting up a completely hidden base was another matter.

If I sought their approval, it would create more points of failure for me. More people would know about the location of my base, which would defeat the purpose. I wanted something that only I and maybe a select few knew.

The most difficult part about that would be constructing it without anyone noticing.

I entered the command to the terminal before us and projected a map of the nearby wasteland.

“We currently have outposts pretty spread out along our logistic route from here all the way to Can Sauce City. We also have the mine nearby as well.” I pointed toward several points on the holographic map.

“Looking at this isn't that helpful, Rollo,” Vin noted. “It doesn't give us a detailed layout of the actual terrains. The wasteland is just blank spaces on the map.”

“I'm just trying to narrow down the general vicinity of where we would like to build our first hidden base.”

He shrugged and didn't respond, so I continued examining the map. We had the territory of each wasteland clan in the area clearly marked. They each covered a wide area, and it was hard to pick something within them. They were nomads who moved around their territory regularly. If I picked somewhere in their land, it would deteriorate our relationship if they discovered me.

Well, it's just sand out there, so it wasn't hard to get discovered eventually. That is, if I built it on the surface.

I quickly ran some calculations in my mind and deemed it possible to create an underground base. It would require quite a bit of initial investment, but security was invaluable.

“Okay, prepare to survey some potential places. How does next week sound?”

Vin looked at me with a raised eyebrow.

“A week? That’s a lot more patient than you usually are.”

“I need to make some modifications to our transports first. We’ll need them for the construction.”

I didn’t waste any time discussing further and began heading to the garage.

I needed to modify a few transports and add stealth capabilities. Otherwise, it wouldn’t make sense to build a hidden base if others could track our transports. The wasteland may interfere with most detection methods, but I had to play it safe.

A week passed by quickly and we swiftly found ourselves in the wasteland once more. Our Wraith comfortably traveled through the sandstorm that ever persisted, bringing us to our destination, the Wells Clan.

Our men out here stayed in regular contact with them, so we knew their general location even when they moved around a lot.

As usual, several sand buggies approached us once we neared their area. Our relationship had gone on for a while, so after a few basic questions, they quickly led us back to their clan.

They brought us to an enormous crater that was protected from the elements, and where they erected their temporary buildings. This time, I couldn’t help but carefully examine their techniques. I wanted to know how they set up their buildings atop the sandy foundations.

I didn’t get to stare for long as I was led to meet with their leader. I found Eugene Wells, the leader of the Wells Clan, the same as always. He had a full beard and was lying on top of a pile of carpets with a smoking pipe in hand.

There were a few new things in his room, though. There was a large screen terminal in the back, and several pristine refrigerators equipped with smart inventory management modules were present. It was a sign they had adopted to the tech normally found in the city now that they regularly traded with us.

“Eugene, it’s been a while.”

“Yes, my children have missed you. You should go find that after this if you have the time.”

I nodded, and he returned the gesture.

“So tell me, Rollo. Why have you come? I assume this isn’t just a leisure trip.”

“I was just stopping by for some advice. I’m exploring the idea of making my outposts more self-sufficient from now on. I wanted to investigate how you guys do it.”

“You’ve seen our mootants before, and our other facilities. What else did you want to know?”

“I know how you dig for water and domesticate mutants, but the human diet is more complicated. I don’t think you guys buy supplements from the city. So where else do you get your nutrients?”

“We’re nomads, as you know. We don’t farm, if that’s what you’re thinking. Even with sandstorms, we are still blessed with nature’s bounty. You just need to know where to find it. Various types of cactus and other plants exist.”

As he began explaining, it was obvious he was passionate about the subject as he rambled on. I listened quietly and evaluated if there was anything we could emulate. While I kept an open mind to learn, I still preferred solving the issues with technological alternatives if possible.

He explained how they harvested a lot of supplies across their territories, which obviously weren’t suitable for my needs. Seeing how I didn’t find any superior solutions to implement, I defaulted back to using hydroponics to solve our food needs. It was expensive but less vulnerable.

However, that didn’t mean I stopped listening to Eugene ramble on. The part I listened to most attentively was their construction techniques. They had their own unique way of finding suitable areas with stable foundations to set up dwellings on. One needed to know the ecosystem of mutants as well.

I recorded everything he had said and thanked him for his time.

By that time, I only had enough time to briefly greet Sarah and Caleb, the two I had once rescued, before I had to depart.

Once I returned to our outpost, I got straight into designing our base and how to construct it. After my talks with Eugene, the general location had already been decided in my mind. I just needed to survey the actual sites to confirm the specific location.

The next day, I did just that.

Even when I found a location, it still took weeks and weeks to get everything ready. In order to speed things up, I didn’t hesitate to unleash Lanus onto the limited equipment of the outpost.

My AI assistant was particularly useful in polishing my designs. I never had an architectural background, so it was much needed.

After a month of preparation, I was finally ready to build the construction. During that entire time, I didn’t forget to face off against the local mutants during my spare time for some of those juicy experience points.

Status	
Level:	27

EXP:	220/2700
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 +12 ● Software Engineering +11 ● Electrical Engineering +10
Enhancements:	SAID: Zenitech Sebastien v2 Bio-Coprocessor: SocialCorp Lightning II 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 Sensory: Halls Corp Argus Elite Custom Additional Processing: Halls Corp Custom ST Miscellaneous: Halls Corp HSU Custom Shade

I had leveled up twice. I put all my points into stealth technology, as that was what I would be focusing on. It allowed me to comfortably escape the clutches of my captors, and it would do so again. I couldn't afford to be captured again.

I wanted to accentuate my specialties even more. The two levels in stealth tech cost me four entire upgrade points, and it was worth it. The knowledge that rushed into my brain wasn't a lot, but made up for it in quality.

It helped me refine my construction plan, and use better materials that could escape the eyes of any scans. It took some time to create the right materials with the knowledge I had, but even a makeshift attempt at twelve points was not something to be underestimated.

Besides knowledge of how to make fixed assets undetectable, the upgrade even gave me a clue on how to counter my mortal nemesis, the door. Throughout all my infiltration missions, doors were always a challenge. The new knowledge I attained wasn't just on materials and

technology to avoid detection, but fooling the perception. This included both fooling organic and inorganic senses. Taken to the extreme, it could even create false illusions.

However, that took more intensive research to accomplish.

It was something I had to put on the back burner for now while I directed my fleet of transports deep into the wasteland. There was only Thorne and Andrew's squad with us. All the vehicles were on auto-drive, following us.

They carried various construction supplies and water. We made sure to acquire a vehicle that could tunnel down below for us as well.

Our new hidden base was going to be underground, beneath all the sand. It would just be the first of many, and a prototype was always important to set the tone.