

# Chapter 189: New Place, Same Work

## Claire - Halls Corporation

Claire strode headfirst toward the unit that she got out of interrogating the half-asleep man. He had told her to speak with the people in unit 27-15. While he hadn't elaborated, it was easy enough for Claire to deduct that it was where the minions who were in charge of the gang's front gate.

Even gangs had hierarchies. She doubted a random guy out front would lead her directly to their leader.

The entire place had the same layout as the floors above, which were identical to all other megabuildings. There was a large terrace where stalls or seats were placed. Every few paces was a retail unit for proper stores. For Rollo, he had worked at a convenience store inside one of these retail units once upon a time.

Off to the corners were the various pathways that led to the numerous residential units.

On this particular floor, the caretakers had removed every last obstacle around. It made it look a lot more spacious than usual, despite the smog polluting the place. The storefronts were boarded up. Only bags of various filth were sprawled about and some of the inhabitants could be seen using them as makeshift cushions.

The place looked even more dirty due to the low lighting. Maintenance hadn't been done, and some lights were broken or dim. Sunlight wasn't available for these sublevels, so it was inevitable that visibility was poor.

While they made their way toward their new destination, they quickly heard the sound of chattering come from up ahead. It didn't take long for them to spot a large group headed their way. They had over twenty men versus their seven. However, Claire and her guards remained undeterred.

The two groups only stopped walking when they were twenty feet away from each other. Any sharp-minded spectators would definitely clear out of the area if they saw this scene. Both parties were armed to the teeth and did not look friendly. Despite outnumbering Claire's group, the newcomer cautiously appraised the intruders.

Claire had the appearance of a brawny man who towered over the gang members. More importantly, her entire group's appearance was that of cyborgs. No one would be dumb enough to underestimate more than half a dozen of those monsters.

"I think you guys strolled into the wrong area. What do you borgs want?" the leading man shouted.

Claire took her time examining the new gang members. From their markings, she knew they were from the gang called Retribution Angels, who were their target.

“We’re here to make a trade. If you’re not in charge, go get us someone who is,” Claire’s response came out in a gruff manner with the help of her vocal implant.

It was then the opposition’s turn to stare. They scrunched up their faces as they watched their every move.

“Wait, here.”

The man soon returned with a short and stocky man. They then began to discuss with Claire regarding their purpose.

The Halls Corporation was willing to spend a massive amount of money to purchase the property. Of course, it wouldn’t be under their name or anything related to them. No one around these parts dealt with the legality of ownership.

They needed to get the current leaders to move their group or take over it by force.

That was why Claire had sought their leader right away. As they had planned, these individuals near the top often had great ambition. They leaped at the opportunity when they heard the amount offered.

A million credits may sound like a lot for a regular working person, but at the level of conglomerates, a million didn’t get you too far.

The plan went well, as Claire could see the money signs shining from their eyes.

However, just when the negotiation was drawing near a close, a young man walked into the room. He was accompanied by half a dozen guards and was treated like a king to all the surrounding people.

The man went straight to his companions, who then explained the situation to him. After hearing the details, he turned to the Halls employees without any warmth in his eyes.

“Get out of here. We don’t move at anyone’s beck and orders,” the wide young man declared.

“Calm down, Jason. They’re offering us a lot of money here. Please think it through first.”

“I thought it through. These guys better leave or bullets will start flying!”

At his declaration, the Halls employees visibly tensed up. They scanned the area for threats as they kept the vantage points clear. Thankfully, this unpleasant experience didn’t last for long. Seeing negotiations breaking down, Claire took charge and guided her people away.

Claire's entourage grouped back on the ground floor as they replanned.

"These Retribution Angels don't sound like they'll be accepting our offers," one of her guards stated plainly. "What do we do?"

"Sounds to me like it is just a vocal minority within their leadership. Let's call Lucy and see what her department can do about it. If we can make them befall some 'accidents', then maybe we can make some progress unhindered."

Even when dealing with regular street gangs, the Halls Corporation took no chances and was merciless. Information was quickly relayed and the relevant personnel were sent. The spec-ops in the security department charged off first thing.

They had been ordered to perform a decapitation strike, removing hostile entities within the Retribution Angels. The only requirement was to make the deed look like an accident.

Claire continued to check in every few days. They monitored the change in leadership within the gang and only visited when those who agreed with their deal were present. It was on the sixth day after their previous leader had tragically passed away in an accident that the Halls Corporation received a positive reply.

After some back and forth regarding the price, the Retribution Angels agreed to leave the area to make room for the new 'gang' in town.

One party received money while the other received land. Both sides were happy.

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There wasn't a whole lot for me to tour of the new base. It was mostly empty except for the hardware Claire had transferred over. Other than that, it was quite spartan. We would have to take some time to set up the place to make it more livable. After all, I would mainly be staying here from now on.

Once I took a preliminary tour of the facility, I double-checked the basic security was up and running. Then I began installing Lanus into its new home.

There was still some hardware awaiting transfer, but enough was here to get Lanus working on a research project for me. The more hardware we could procure, the more it would be able to do.

"Lanus, it's been some time. Are you ready to resume your duties?"

"Affirmative. Please direct which project you would like me to work on."

“For now, resume working on the cassettes. Also, resume monitoring the company activities once you have the capability to do so. I'll try to get you access to the headquarters network somehow.”

With its instructions, both Lanus and I got to work.

For me, I intended to make another pass on Lanus before anything else. That was because I pulled the trigger and upgraded my software engineering once more after I had gotten another level. It was worthwhile to stay out in the wasteland for the past month or so.

Status	
Level:	28
EXP:	360/2800
Musculoskeletal:	211
Neural Reflex:	65
Visuomotor Coordination:	87
Endurance:	59
Sensory Perception:	127
Upgrade Points:	0
Upgrades:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Stealth +7</li> <li>● Hacking +5</li> <li>● Cybernetic Engineering +10</li> <li>● Stealth Technology +12</li> <li>● Software Engineering +12</li> <li>● Electrical Engineering +10</li> </ul>
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 made this decision after witnessing how outmatched we were against the big corporations.

In the short term, we couldn't just upgrade everything just because we wanted to. A lot of the high-end equipment was developed in-house, so there was no way for us to take a shortcut and just buy our way up. It simply wasn't realistic to develop high-tech cybernetics, weapons, armor, and other equipment while having them leapfrog in ability.

However, there were two big advantages I currently did have. They were software and stealth. After seeing how power armor was the norm in high-level combat, I began getting ideas for integrating onboard AIs to assist the user in combat. It would simplify the controls, allowing me to add more complexity to it. It was likely possible to have an AI control the entire thing, without needing a person, but that was a step too far for me.

AIs weren't infallible. I still wanted an actual person controlling the weapon, hence assisting. Other than that, AIs could even be integrated into our vehicles, guns, and potentially our ships once we had a few.

For our other advantage of stealth, I planned to first work on maximizing the difficulty of finding our various hidden bases, including the one I was currently in. Research into bulk materials that could block scans wasn't something I had dove into before. I would have to start from scratch.

It was only after all these research topics that I would get to the other things on my to-do list. It had gotten pretty lengthy, with things like power armor, cybernetics, commercial products, and even our own aircraft on the horizon.

Upgrading Lanus didn't take too long, but it was tedious. Due to the improvements I implemented in the software side of things, the ideal hardware layout had to be changed as well. Their performances were tied together, and we had to maximize various aspects such as heat management and redundancy.

While I was in the midst of working, I received an alert from the resident AI.

"Report. The basic setup for the cassette research project is complete. Awaiting your directive regarding the contents and test subjects."

Hearing that message, I quickly got my SAID to contact Thorne.

"Hey Thorne, can you go send out a team to fetch and test subjects? According to our new protocols, of course."

"Sure, I'll see who's available."

With my capable employees handling the grunt work, I resumed my coding. I didn't forget to pull up the feed to the security personnel helping me source the test subjects. The capture was quite routine, as harvesters were caught off guard and outnumbered by well-equipped corporate soldiers.

They simply had no counter to the amazing synergy between our Nyes and the synchronized targeting system. The Nyes were our additional eyes, allowing my guards to see any targets they saw, regardless of how many walls separated them. If we didn't care about making a scene, they could literally shoot them through the walls from a safe distance.

When they retrieved the captives, the team discreetly pulled up to my new facility. They transferred a majority of the harvesters to Lanus before returning to base. However, it wasn't over from there. Now that we were a lot more security conscious, we had decided to have body doubles replace me at headquarters.

They would show their face around for morale and trick our enemies of my location. It wasn't even that hard to set up. With our projection technology, anyone could fill the role after some training.

I got déjà vu seeing my security forces repeat their actions, handing over some test subjects to my body double who was inside our official base. Claire and Thorne had everything in order, so they could handle most of the day-to-day affairs while I stayed in my new workshop. Once it expanded a little more, they could join me as well.

There was no need to have our essential people stay in one place where they could be targeted.

Like that, two weeks passed by quickly. Two weeks I spent inside the sublevel workshop.

I managed to complete my upgrade on Lanus during that time. I had also taken the liberty of creating a preliminary template for an AI for vehicles and power armor.

When I was done, Lanus informed me that our latest cassette was close to completion as well. The new content I chose was sourced from the files I had downloaded from Nova Tech. They allowed me access to their database, which was a rich databank their researchers relied on. While there wasn't anything notable, it gave me a nice foundation of knowledge to empower my employees with.

Our expansion hinged on human resources. It meant it was only that much more important to focus on improving the quality of our personnel.

With that thought in mind, I made my way over to where Lanus had been doing its experiments. I found myself in the control room that overlooked a larger room filled with dozens of hospital beds. Each one had a former harvester on it, hooked up to various machines.

As I stared out at the other side of the glass that separated me from them, I instantly knew what was to come. Another round of rapid expansion was upon us, but we first had to strengthen our foundation first. It may take up to a year, but it was something we had to do if we wanted to expand without issue.

*Things will be getting busy. I hope Claire and everyone else at the office are prepared.*