

Aldecaldos

Alexander Shepard sat at the end of a long set of tables, a TV playing in the corner. Attached to that TV was a series of scanners and signal catchers, where a handy little program was slicing into the nearby broadcast nodes. All of that tech worked together to allow the Nomads to watch local television without paying local taxes. That included, of course, the live feed of the press conference their benefactor was putting on, though technically, this was a recording of that live feed. Alexander sat there, watching the recording carefully, several other members of the Aldecaldos branch watching with him. Eventually, after the final question was answered, he tapped a remote to pause the feed.

"So, what do you guys think?" the nomad leader asked, looking around the table. "Any thoughts?"

"I think we knew most of this already, didn't we, boss?" Panam Palmer said, leaning back in her folding chair. "We knew he was looking to buy land, we did most of his research for him."

"We had no idea it would be this big," [Mitch Anderson](#) pointed out. "We knew it was something, but..."

Alexander nodded, agreeing with his point.

"This is certainly beyond what we thought he was working toward," he agreed with another nod. "Two skyscrapers, a shopping and business district, and a second large project by the dock. And he still has a huge chunk of land that he has yet to mention? That's more than we saw coming."

"Sorry, boss, but... why do we really care?" Callis asked, scratching her head. "It's linefoot business. I mean, I like the plumbing as much as the next wanderer, and the food certainly hit a high point..."

Most of the people around the table nodded at that last point, several of them looking down at the trays of food in front of them, all of them picked clean. Alexander had to stop himself from picking up his cup, which contained a rather refreshing peach lemonade. While his people were raving about the food, he quietly enjoyed the drinks far more. Refreshing, non-alcoholic drinks were rare these days, and almost all of the drinks served from Jackie's test kitchen were amazing.

"...but it's none of our business. We won't be living there."

"Maybe, but I think dismissing it is unwise," Louise Sorin, the best Netrunner in the group, suggested. "Our benefactor is behind the wheel of what is potentially the most substantial change in Night City in decades. He isn't just shuffling the deck, he is flipping the table. To say that it won't have any effect on us is shortsighted."

"What do we actually know about him? Jackson, that is?" One of the lead mechanics asked. "He seemed awfully comfortable in that shiny corpo outfit."

"Dakota's people say he is a ghost unlike anything they have ever seen. He just *doesn't* exist beyond starting to rent an apartment in a megabuilding a few months ago," Louise responded. "It's like he just appeared one day in the apartment. That is a huge red flag."

"You guys are getting blinded by a flashy outfit," Panam said, shaking her head. "You've seen him around camp. He sits down and talks with us, chats about the weather, about the kids, and cars. His bots have made several expensive parts for us for ennies on the eddie. Hell, most of you saw him get dirty helping change out that starter motor the other day. What kind of corpo just volunteers to get greasy with a bunch of nomads?"

That seemed to get through to the few members of the group who had agreed with the lead mechanic. The mechanic himself frowned but nodded, conceding the point.

"He had dealt with us with nothing but honesty and respect," Alexander pointed out. "That said, even if I may personally like him, his actions will have an effect on us. People will be scrutinizing everything about him, and that includes us."

"With all due respect, Alexander, we are nomads. We are used to being scrutinized." Panam pointed out. "What's a few more eyes on us?"

"The difference is this attention is not the same as some rent a cop pushing us out of someone's unused land," Alexander pointed out. "This is going to be heavy interest from some big names."

"Then let's get some extra security going," someone suggested. "Use those nice power armors he gave us, arm them with big weapons, and stage them around the walls. Should give people pause for just walking in."

"We can do that. We could also ask for some more suits," Alexander. "We will have to trade for them, but I'm sure we could work with that. Anything else?"

"You think he can do it, Boss?" Mitch asked, leaning forward on the table. "Create something like Pacifica without having it blow up in his face?"

"If anyone has a chance to, it would be him," Alexander admitted. "I have a feeling we've only seen the tip of the iceberg when it comes to what he is capable of, and what we have seen is incredibly impressive."

"Real makes you wonder what he's got going on behind the scenes," Callis asked, scratching his neck. "Think we could get access to a bit further below the water line?"

"Do we really want to see how the [kibble](#) is made?" One of the maintenance crew pointed out. "Jackson has been nice, and he may not be a corpo, but I doubt he will let us just walk away once we peek behind the curtain."

Alexander was silent for a little while, listening to his people as they discussed the possibilities. Some of them were reasonable, while others were unlikely, and a few more were nearly impossible. Eventually, he raised his hand, stopping the idle conversation dead.

"With how things are right now, leaving isn't on the table. We are here and already connected to him," The leader said, chewing on his own frown. "I will talk to Jackson about getting more security, I don't doubt he will want to chip in. As for his business... I plan on asking to be let in just a bit deeper into what is going on. If we are going to be staying with him for the near future, I want a better idea of what is approaching."

"You think he's just going to show off?" Panam asked.

"Given some of the things we have seen... I think he will be willing to share a little with some encouragement," Alexander responded after a moment of consideration.

While Jackson had been secretive about some of his work, as evidenced by the sudden reveal of things like his power armor, some of his secrets were only that in name. His people all quickly came to the unspoken conclusion that the less said about these things, the better, but that didn't mean that they didn't see them. A few of the robots, what they called MRVNs, seemed to be a bit more... animate than the others, specifically the one with the extra arms built into its torso. The robot doctor was also more lively than any robot Alexander had ever seen.

While it seemed insane, what else could that be but AI? They would have assumed something like borg, if Jackson and a few others hadn't specifically called them robots, and referenced when they were made.

Then there was the constant disappearing, people walking into Jackson's workshop and staying in there for hours, even overnight. Most of his people assumed they had some sort of expanded bunker space under the building, but... Something in his gut says it was something else.

"What if he isn't interested in sharing?" Louise asked. "I don't like how big a target he is painting on himself. We could get caught in the crossfire! We should leave while we can, before Maelstrom or someone else comes knocking on these walls."

Louise's statement was harsh, but not unwarranted, and a few around the table nodded in agreement. Before Alexander could say anything in response, Panam cut in.

"Since when do we shy away from a little danger?" Panama asked, voicing what Alexander was thinking, though perhaps a bit more aggressively than he would prefer. "Jackson has treated us with respect, even when Saul was... even when it would have been understandable not to. That alone is enough to stand by him and his people. Not to mention the opportunities for more gear and work."

"I've already discussed the possibility of leaving with Dakota, as I said, it's off the table," Alexander explained. "We both feel that maintaining a positive connection to Jackson, his business, and his people is important. And not just for what he can do for us. Panama is correct,

the respect he gives us is something we cannot afford to pass aside. As long as he is friendly with us, we will return the favor."

It seemed most of the people at the table agreed, and though Louise and a few others clearly weren't happy with the conclusion, they stayed quiet. After giving them a minute to consider their response, Alexander nodded. Soon, the conversation around the table shifted to more normal topics, including things like vehicle repair and the ever-important food budget.

Fixers

It wasn't often that fixers communicated directly with each other. Sure, the lines were open, but that was necessary when you're playing a game at their level. As much as they competed with each other, sometimes it was required to warn, negotiate, entreat, or otherwise deal with your competition.

Usually, that happened through intermediaries and messages. Folks didn't like hearing that the people giving them gigs, especially gigs that cut into other fixers' territory, were actually more or less okay with each other. It made them feel like the system was rigged, like their struggle wasn't necessary.

And, to be fair, they weren't far off.

Still, sometimes intermediaries weren't enough. Sometimes, passed messages and "anonymous" tips weren't enough. Sometimes, a fixer needed to pick up the phone and call another fixer. Usually, it was a short, tense affair.

But there was nothing usual about these circumstances. Which is why, at the behest of Wakako and Regina, a video conference was established between them and any of the Night City fixers who cared enough to tune in. The two that called for the meeting expected more, but only three fixers in total responded: Padre, Dakota, and Rogue.

Once the time for the meeting arrived, the connection went live, five screens across Night City activating to show the movers and shakers, at least at the level they worked in. As the ones to call the meeting, Wakako and Regina were the first to speak. There was no beating around the bush. They all knew why they were here.

"Greetings," Wakako said, giving a slight bow. "We have much to discuss about the changes in Watson."

"Do we?" Rogue asked, her camera showing her leaning back in her booth at the Afterlife. "What is there to discuss? The land was purchased legally, and they hold it with their own power. Why does it involve us? Beyond the normal gigs being called to see what's inside."

"It's a dangerous shift in the city's balance," Regina pointed out, Wakako nodding in agreement. "Remember what happened to the city when Pacifica went south? If that happens again, I don't know if Night City would survive."

"Of course, Night City would survive," Dakota responded, shaking her head. "It's a city, not a person. Besides, Jackson and his crew have done more good for the city by crushing Maelstrom than any other group in the last decade."

"The death of the Maelstrom is well worth the chance," Padre added. "I am... hopeful that Jackson and his crew will bring stability to the area, and hopeful they will help the people forced to live there."

"I am not surprised that you two support him," Wakako said, her words holding an edge. "Your association with this Jackson has been clear."

"My association with Jackson has been business first," Dakota explained, her tone shifting to match Wakako's. "I am perfectly capable of judging the situation fairly."

"My association with the group has been negligible for quite some time," Padre pointed out. "My judgment of their potential does not come from any investment."

"Then you won't have a problem seeing how this is a threat to everyone," Regina said, cutting off Wakako's scathing response. "As much as I wish Night City could change, this is too much, too fast. He is flipping the board, and the consequences will not be pleasant for those caught in the crossfire."

"Why don't you just tell us what you two are proposing, then?" Rogue said, cutting off any response while focusing on Regina and Wakako. "It's clear that you two have something in mind. What is it?"

The feed was silent for a long while, most of the fixers waiting for a response, while Regina and Wakako formulated their answer. Eventually, it was Regina who spoke first.

"We need to provide a united front against such a massive shift in power," she explained. "Jackson and Sable Arcturus now own close to a fourth of Watson. They hold too much power, but by denying our services and -"

"You would break neutrality to target someone?" Padre asked. "That goes against everything fixers work to be."

"No, we would-"

"I don't think this has anything to do with the balance. I think you're worried about your holdings," Dakota said, crossing her arms. "A huge chunk of your territory was just bought up, and if their improvements go as they plan, a lot of your previous stomping ground is going to be a deadzone for business."

"I have to say, I'm surprised. You have a reputation for being one of the good guys, Regina," Rogue added, shifting languidly in her seat. "Well, for what passes as good in this city. I expected something like this from Wakako, since Tyger Claws suddenly just got a big, bad, land-hungry neighbor. But from you?"

Rogue shook her head, and while Regina didn't quite look proud of herself, she didn't back down.

"Jackson is a new, unpredictable influence on the city," She said, standing her ground. "We have no idea what he is doing, what he could do. In just a week, he purchased land, ran a crusade against a gang, granted it was one no one will miss, and then began demolishing huge chunks of his new property. What happens when he starts demolishing apartments, driving people from their homes?"

"What could we do about it anyway?" Dakota asked, shaking her head. "We could deny our services, sure, but would that matter? He has a small army of robots, which appears to be more advanced than what Arasaka can field. What use does he have for fixers?"

Regina was once again silent. Instead, Wakako was the one to speak up.

"While some of us may not have much, I do know some of us have connections, favors, and influence," she said simply. "An all-out conflict would be ill-advised. However, calling in a few favors to slow their progress and prevent them from pushing too far is possible. It would allow the city to stabilize and prevent them from pushing into territory that is not theirs to claim."

"Again, breaking even the barest facsimile of neutrality," Padre responded, shaking his head.

"To be fair, you can't exactly expect them both to roll over and die," Rogue pointed out. "They clearly expected more of our peers to respond to the call."

Despite her part in the particularly low showing, the old fixer kept her face calm. She knew that both [Muamar Reyes](#) and [Dino Dinovic](#) had intended to join the conference call, but she had worked to dissuade them. Dino stopped caring once she innocently pointed out the call had nothing to do with making eddies, and would likely end up costing anyone who Wakako or Regina ended up persuading. Muamar was a bit harder, as he liked sticking his nose where it didn't belong, all under the guise of helping the little guy.

Thankfully, his distaste for Tyger Claws was enough to get him to snub the Tyger Claws fixer.

"And without others to support your agenda, I see no reason for us to change," Padre said with a nod. "You are on your own."

Wakako and Regina both reacted poorly to the statement, the former journalist looked disappointed, while the latter barely contained her simmering frustration. If they had successfully convinced enough of their peers that they were correct, then all of them would have been forced to move together in order to maintain an illusion of neutrality and, funnily enough, a balance

between all fixers. If they had moved together, it could have been disguised as a necessary move that Jackson somehow earned. But with nobody else to convince, they were now the minority, meaning they were on their own. Any move they made would make them stand out as adversaries and as actively engaged in working against Jackson and his plan.

Not only was it a bad look, but it was dangerous to put yourself out there like that. While the Padre's vaunted neutrality was a joke, a fixer with a direct agenda was harder to trust.

Rogue had to hold back a smirk as the two instigators continued to argue their point, but all parties involved knew that it was over. Now it was just about saving face by not giving up immediately. In reality, thanks to her actions in keeping more of their peers from appearing, the two fixers had lost before they even started. Padre and Dakota both benefited from Jackson and his business's growth, and she... Well, she was intrigued by the new player.

Rarely had Rogue seen the landscape of Night City shift so quickly. An entire gang gone, a massive chunk of land shifting hands, and now a new face, extolling the need for change and the power of Night City's potential. Idealistic, naive, potentially manipulative, but also... something new. Something interesting.

Rogue couldn't help but want to see where all of this went, and how Night City would change as it did.

Arasaka Meeting Room

The tension in the long, dark meeting room was thick enough that breathing felt difficult, like you were pulling the air into your chest. A slate grey table sat in the middle of the room, ringed with chairs, though it was dark enough that the shadows hid most of them.

Along one end of the table sat Yorinobu Arasaka, dressed in his usual business casual. He peered through his armless sunglasses, eyes pausing over the half dozen people sitting on the opposite side of the table.

Of course, most of the tension was not from him. Yorinobu was a known quantity at the Night City branch of Arasaka. He was a rich party boy who liked to make expensive scenes when he didn't get his way, which happened often, as "his way" frequently ran counter to what his father's orders were.

No, the tension came from Yorinobu's ever-present bodyguard, [Adam Smasher](#). The infamously murder hungry Borg stood behind his charge, arms crossed, looking bored, and yet still somehow managed to seem bloodthirsty and violent. Several of the seated Arasaka employees flinched as the borg shifted, his servos whirring softly.

"Would someone like to tell me what the hell is going on?" Yorinobu asked, watching his various underlings share looks, trying to figure out who was going first. "Well?"

"Sir, it appears that both Sable Arcturus and this... Jackson were able to purchase a significant amount of cheap land," one of the underlings explained.

"How the hell did they find cheap land in Night City? How was there so much?"

"By focusing on land infested with Maelstrom, which was dirt cheap, Sir," The underling responded. "They then forced Maelstrom out or killed them with an effective combination of a strike team and advanced robotic weapons."

"How advanced?" Yoronobu asked, leaning forward.

"Well, sir... we haven't been able to get a sample... but they seem well balanced, accurate and tough," A separate man, one Yoronobu was vaguely aware of as head of some development team or something. "We were able to make several observations from footage recorded and posted from their clash at the docks."

"...And?" Yoronobu asked, rolling his eyes and gesturing for him to continue with an annoyed look.

"Their armor seems to be a ceramic alloy, designed to absorb impacts, break, and be replaced," The engineer said. "Smart, considering the effectiveness of ceramic body armor, but it is far from cost-effective. Their weapons are powerful, especially the large robots. Their power armor is also impressive, powerful for its size, and extremely agile. It has thrusters along its back and-

"Just some canned meat," Adam Smasher cut in, silencing the room. "Nothing fancy."

The engineer's mouth hung open, seemingly stuck trying to decide if he should continue, but he was unable to find his voice again. Instead, Yoronobu rolled his eyes and cut through the heavy silence.

"What do we know about the two investors? Who bought this land?"

"Sable Arcturus is a known element, she has even worked for a company we own through intermediaries. Her family is moderately well known with decent resources," someone said, an intelligence officer of some kind. "She is known as a black sheep of sorts. Refuses jobs given to her by her grandfather, refuses to work in family-owned businesses."

"...And this Jackson?"

"... Well...as far as we can tell, before a few months ago, he didn't exist," The intelligence officer explained. "We have no record of him, or anyone who looks like him ever existing."

"What does that mean?" Yoronobu asked, leaning forward to put his elbow on the table. "Surely you have something on him."

"Before around two months ago, we have nothing," He continued. "After that, we have several sightings of him in the city, working with various fixers and doing several mercenary missions. Beyond that... He doesn't exist."

"Theories?"

"He is obviously a plant," His head of security said, the only one of the people Yorinobu actually paid attention to. "Some plastic surgery, some speech therapy, and a little bit of money, and anyone can start new in Night City. It happens all the time."

"Why? Why go through the trouble to plant him here, for this?" Yorinobu asked, raising an eyebrow. "What's the point?"

"To avoid backlash," the intelligence head responded. "It's obvious they have major backing. By moving in anonymously, we didn't react to their approach. Jackson purchased the outer town of Rocky Ridge. If one of our competitors did that, it would have set off alarm bells. But because it was just a singular private purchase..."

Yorinobu was silent for a long moment, as he seemed to be considering what he was learning, a frown on his face as he looked back at his engineer.

"And what about these invisible transports? First, they are dropping off their robots, then they drop off their hit squad," He said. "Now they are dropping off construction materials. How did we not see these coming?"

"Well... our sensors didn't pick them up until they-"

"We paid nearly half a billion eddies for the sensors around the tower, and you tell 'em we have nothing?" Yorinobu asked, leaning forward with an angry look on his face. "I want you to crack that yesterday! Those transports could be anywhere, and we would have no idea! There could be one right outside the window, and we could be none the wiser!"

Both the engineer and the head of security shared a nervous look, the latter even glancing out the nearby window, out to the cityscape of Night City.

"We will begin right away, sir," The engineer said with a nod. "I will get our top teams on it."

"Good. We can't do anything until we find out who is truly backing them," Yorinobu responded, shaking his head. "What else? What do we think about the conference?"

"A smoke screen, sir," one of the quieter underlings said. "I believe he is attempting to come off as an eccentric corpo so that he is underestimated. Once their foothold is secure, they will either change tactics or hand over control to whoever is pulling their strings."

Yorinobu nodded as if he expected that to be the case, rapping his fingers against the table. After he was silent for a full minute, his intelligence head spoke up.

"Sir, we could push for more information," He said. "We could hire someone unconnected, through various channels. Or we could see about installing listening devices. We could even see about stealing some of their tech, using it for our own projects."

"No, you will do nothing," Yorinobu said harshly, focusing on each of them. "Observe but do not engage. I will not start a war with someone until I know who they are! Now get out so I can think."

His words dripped with contempt, as if his statement was obvious. With his dismissal, the various underlings quickly gathered their things and left the room. Yorinobu sat there for a long moment, his frown slowly turning into a smile. While he had been working to sabotage his father's company for years, he had always struggled with resources, never able to really make an impact. He had returned to his father's "side" to sabotage it within.

Now, someone with impressive tech and tactics stood up in a place that Arasaka usually dominated, making a claim that, without even any construction, sent reverberations through the entire company.

It may turn out that this Jackson was just a puppet, a cover for another company. But he wouldn't interfere, not if he could help it. A hidden giant had appeared, and with any luck, it would do enough damage to Arasaka that he could pull the rest of it down on his father's head.