

Despite Murtaugh's words, for a moment, nothing happened. Outside the building, there was no change, while inside, none of the soldiers had noticed anything out of the ordinary. Though that wasn't exactly surprising, considering the netrunners had been isolated in their own room, which was usually sealed up.

As we watched the drone footage, suddenly a seam appeared in the air, slowly spreading to reveal the loading ramp for the VTOL transport. As it opened more and more, the twenty-five Spartans finally came into view. Once the ramp was open enough, they moved together, all of them running out and dropping into the air. Jump kits fired off as they spread out, landing onto the building below, as well as around all four sides. They landed in five groups of five, one for each side of the building and one for the roof.

Moving in concert with each other, all five Spartan groups approached their ingress point. For the rooftop group, it was a hatch just big enough for them to squeeze through, while the others approached doors and windows. The team that landed on the side with the ramp leading to the garage had an added issue to deal with, the fake homeless man acting as a sentry.

As they approached, using a dumpster and a pile of trash as cover, one of the Spartans fired a burst of subsonic slugs at the sentry. The mag gun fired rounds were whisper-quiet, and while each one was on target, the durability of the on-guard soldier meant none of them were a kill shot. Still, it kept them busy enough for another one of the Spartans to dash across the ten-meter gap between them in a blink, snapping their neck completely around, before driving a knife in their spine and head, to disable any hope of their recovery.

"They have their lifesigns linked up so they are alerted if any of them die," Mary revealed. "Too bad they depended on the netrunners to watch that system...Spoofing now."

Still undetected, all of the Spartan teams were now in position. After a brief pause, they moved as one. With inhuman precision, they smashed through their ingress points, tearing doors off their hinges, snapping off locks around hatches, and smashing through windows that were covered and reinforced. None of the barriers even remotely slowing them down. The teams of five poured into the buildings, each opening fire immediately, their overwhelming firepower and element of surprise meaning the entrance rooms were cleared in seconds. At this point, they were going loud, meaning their rifles were firing at full speed and power, the cracks of each round breaking the sound barrier alerting everyone in the building.

They could have likely continued fighting silently, but the whole point was for them to drum up a distraction.

"Alright, they are in and getting everyone's attention. Nobody is focusing on the detention center," I pointed out. "Time to get them out."

Murtaugh nodded and quickly shifted his focus to the emergency recovery controls. Seconds later, we could see both Cassie and Sable disappear from the cells. Seconds after that, Murtaugh nodded.

"Frank confirms that Sable and her niece have arrived," the AI security and strategy expert said. "He and Vik are working on getting their vitals, but pulse and breathing are normal for being sedated."

I simply nodded, still watching the screen. The Spartans continued to tear through the soldiers, as the mercenaries attempted to reorganize and mount a defense, but ultimately failed on the top three floors. So far, two of the three borgs had been found, and while they were clearly professional, corporate-level work, they did not stand a chance against any of the teams, especially as they started to converge.

That isn't to say that the Spartans were untouchable. Several of them had been hit with bullets of various sizes, and one of them had been thrown across the room by one of the borgs, but none of them had taken any serious damage. Their armor had absorbed most of the smaller-caliber bullets and impacts, and what didn't hit their outer armor failed to penetrate the reinforced undersuit. The few that were hit with larger-caliber rounds received lighter damage and were relegated to guarding the secured and cleared floors. The one Spartan who had been thrown by the borg was completely unharmed, as the hydrostatic gel layer absorbed the vast majority of the impact.

Watching the thrown Spartan kip up, charge the borg who had thrown it, and put his fist literally *through* their head was something special.

Of course, the mercenary soldiers were not stupid. They pretty quickly picked up on the fact that they were being steamrolled. So, rather than throw their lives away, they moved towards the garage. They attempted to climb into the vehicles, either to escape or to utilize some of the heavier weapons stored on or in the transports. Unfortunately for them, Mary immediately spotted the issue and locked down the vehicles, sealing them and then erasing their operating systems, essentially turning them into useless hunks of metal, plastic, and rubber.

The mercenaries didn't have long enough to even attempt to break inside before the Spartans eliminated them.

The final "challenge" for the Spartans was about eight mercenaries and a single borg that just happened to be on the same floor as the armory. Their weapons were significantly heavier, and they had a variety of explosives, including a few crates of grenades. Despite that advantage, the Spartans had their own plans. Rather than try to push forward through the two accessing stairwells, something shades would have likely done, and what the mercenaries hoped would happen, the Spartans took a page from our playbook. They set up various explosives on the floor above and blew their own access points in the floor, dropping through the newly made openings to engage the mercenaries from above and behind.

They didn't last long after that.

When the building was finally secure, they purposely made a big show of clearing the perimeter again as a second VTOL landed in the street in front of the building. The Spartans quickly retrieved supplies from inside the VTOL and made a show of planting specifically

calculated explosive devices all over the building. When they were done, they openly pulled out, climbed back into the VTOL, and disappeared as it went invisible again. We could see a representation of the flying vehicle, however, as it lifted off into the air. It rose higher and higher before teleporting away a few moments later.

After about fifteen seconds, the VTOL had returned, the building exploded, the control devices shattering the supports and causing the entire building to collapse as everything inside was destroyed. When the explosions finally finished, the whole structure and some of the ground around it had crumbled into the hole we created, the floors collapsing downward. What could burn was, and everything else was a mangled, unrecoverable mess.

When everything had settled, I simply nodded before looking at Mary.

"I want to know who ordered it and why," I said simply. "Don't reveal what you are, or where you are, but everything else is fair game."

Mary nodded, and I turned to leave, with Jackie, Misty, Kaytlyn, and Riggs following after me. It took me a moment to even realize they were, but only Kaytlyn said anything, stopping me before I stepped through another teleporter.

"Jay, we should probably warn Dakota," She pointed out. "She has the closest relationship to you out of any fixer. Plus, she is organizing that whole meeting thing for you..."

I cursed, shaking my head and rubbing my forehead, trying to kickstart my thinking. After a moment I nodded in agreement.

"Yes, that's a good idea. Tell her what's happened and offer her a room in one of the apartments or the Campground," I said. "If you guys can think of anything else... Just run anything big by me first."

Kaytlyn nodded, turning to head back to the monitoring room, standing on her tiptoes to kiss Riggs' face plate as she did. The AI bodyguard just barely leaned into it before settling in to follow me. As Kaytlyn walked away, I called out after her.

"Tell Mary to look into Cassie's parents," I said, my frown deepening. "I have a bad feeling they were... well, find out what's going on with them."

"Will do!"

"Riggs, when you get a chance, tell Samwise to get your frame an upgrade and your armor replaced by a set of MJOLNIR," I said as I turned back around, the idle thought bouncing unbidden to my forebrain.

"I will," He said simply.

I nodded and stepped through the teleporter and emerged in one of several teleport hubs, before stepping through another and ending up in a room I knew existed, but had never been in before.

When I designed the emergency quantum implants, Noah and Samwise realized that, while potentially life-saving, it was also only half of the equation. Yes, being able to pull people from dangerous situations was great, but if too many people needed saving at once, the system would slow down and possibly cost people their lives. There was little chance of that happening with only a few people with the implants, but later, if that number increased, it could be a catastrophe.

On top of that, it was very possible, even likely, that people coming in would be heavily injured. They would need treatment immediately, so setting up a way to get them that was also important.

So, faced with the shortcomings of my idea, the two AI brothers designed the emergency receiving room, or rooms really. One room was basically just a massive open space, with a complicated track system on the ceiling. On that track was the entire teleporter catcher for the entangled photons. At the moment, there was only one, but that could be increased, and the room expanded as necessary. Along the floor of the room were thousands upon thousands of Fallout-style antigrav plates. They were low-powered, just enough to keep someone from impacting the floor hard if they happened to be teleported out of an awkward position, like sitting down. Momentum was not transferred during a teleport, but if your feet weren't on the ground, you would still fall on your ass.

I would have liked to use real anti-gravity, as the Fallout anti-gravity wasn't actually real gravity control. Unfortunately, the only other gravity control method I had was from Halo, and theirs didn't work like that. It could create gravity, but it could not negate it inside another gravity field. I could have increased the effects of gravity, but not negated the Earth's natural pull.

The on-rails teleport could whip around the room, teleporting people onto the floor and moving on to a cleared space. Then, Frank and whatever robots we had helping him would take care of anyone injured, carrying them quickly to the next room over, which was basically an emergency trauma room stocked with everything Frank could possibly need, including entire *tanks* filled with stimpak liquid.

With a combination of speed of delivery and the potency of our equipment and treatments, direct and massive brain trauma was pretty much the only thing we couldn't consistently pull someone back from.

At that point, it was between fate and God.

I arrived at the emergency care room to find both Sable and Cassie already in comfortable gurneys. They both had a few bits of monitoring equipment on them, though it wasn't anything invasive. Frank was standing by Cassie, scanning a tablet. As we approached, he turned to greet us.

"We are running their blood now to try and find out what they were dosed with, but all the readings we have are telling me they are simply under the effects of a fast-acting sedation," He explained, passing me the tablet. "Both of their vitals are steady and well within acceptable levels."

"That's... that's good," I said, reading off the tablet for a moment before passing it back. "Any damage to them at all?"

"Some bruising, scans showed nothing serious," he said, shaking his head. "If they feel overly sore when they wake up, I can give them a small dose of stimpak solution, that should solve everything."

"Any idea when they will be waking up?"

"Fast-acting sedatives like that usually wear off pretty fast without constant dosage, but there is no way to know for sure until we get the blood results back," Frank responded, confirming what I mostly already knew. "They are safe, healthy, and once we know what kind of sedation they are under, we can work on a way to wake them up, or just let them wake up normally."

I finally let out a long breath, nodding in understanding, before making my way over to Sable. I stood at the foot of her bed, watching her chest slowly rise and fall. I stood there for a full ten minutes, my mind rolling over everything that had happened, trying to put together what I was going to do.

With every passing minute, I could feel myself getting angrier and angrier. How dare they pull something like this. How dare anyone hurt Sable and put her niece in danger.

Eventually, Frank confirmed what the drug was, and he assured me Sable would wake naturally in about an hour, with Cassie probably staying unconscious for a bit longer. Not long after that, Samwise arrived, standing by me for a moment before finally speaking up.

"Mary has more information," he explained, speaking quietly. "She managed to trace some of the accounts that funded the safe house, as well as this specific mission."

I nodded, and after giving Sable's hand a squeeze, I followed my AI assistant out of the emergency care room, Riggs following after me silently. Samwise led us to a small side room just outside the emergency treatment and transport room. I was surprised to find that Jackie had hung around and that Kaytlyn was there as well. Mary was "standing" on a small projector on a table, occasionally glancing off at something only she could see.

"I was able to confirm that Arasaka was the one funding the mercenaries and owned the building they were in," the powerful AI confirmed as we stepped into the room. "I had to hack through half the net, back and forth a few dozen times, but it looks like the mercenary team was stationed here long-term about a year and a half ago. Before that, it was likely a different group. They are a wet-works team, brought in to solve problems."

"Have we seen anything from Arasaka before this?" I asked with a frown. "Any signs of interest, anyone sniffing around?"

"No, but we really wouldn't," She responded with a frown. "I'm confident that the local branch of Arasaka did not fund this team. Hell, I don't even think they knew about it. Everything I

could find says this is an asset from abroad. The money for this mission specifically was the same, it did not come from Night City."

"So...like the home office?" I asked, now starting to feel confused. "Why go over the local branch heads?"

"Perhaps someone was unhappy with the lack of activity? Or was interested in something specific," Samwise suggested. "While we have held back considerably, we have also shown off some interesting technology. Perhaps someone important noticed something that they wanted to get their hands on."

"And was going to use Sable and Cassie to negotiate," I commented, shaking my head. "I knew we would have issues with this eventually. I should have seen this coming."

"What are we going to do now?" Jackie asked, leaning back against the wall, not too far from me. "We can't do nothing, but we can't exactly march into NCPD and demand they investigate."

"But if we retaliate, this is only going to escalate," Kaytlyn pointed out. "We have been holding back, if we step things up, they will step up too."

"If we do nothing, we show them they can do whatever they want," I said, shaking my head. "There is no fucking way I'm letting this slide. Mary, is there any way to find who exactly ordered this?"

"The mission was funded by one of their larger departments, but there isn't a single person's name tagged on it," She admitted with a frown. "That said... this team isn't something just anyone could call up and send out. I doubt anyone but the top brass would have access."

I stood there for a long stretch, considering my options. At this point, if I wanted to make a statement, there wasn't much we couldn't do. That said, the part of me that wanted to keep this small and specific to the offending department was rapidly drowning in my frustration and rising anger.

"...Where is Saburo Arasaka?" I asked after a long moment.

"Genio..."

"Jay..."

"What?" I fired back, turning to look at Jackie and Kaytlyn. "Someone in his company decided to try and fuck with us. So let's show them we don't fuck around, that they aren't the big players they think they are."

"...Saburo Arasaka was last seen entering his family estate two days ago," Mary responded quietly. "It is off the coast of the Chiba prefecture, on a man-made island."

"Can you get in?"

The Smart AI was silent for a full five seconds, prompting me to turn and focus on her, as that was an eternity for an AI at her power level. She had a distant look on her face, which I took to mean she was still working on it.

"No, it is airgapped, and there isn't any way I can see to jump across," She responded. "I would need to be given access inside the network."

"Fine, we have a way to get in anyway," I said, shaking my head, turning to look at Sam. "Have you been keeping the stealth suit updated?"

"I successfully combined the two variations you created, as well as upgrading the materials," he confirmed, referring to the Chinese Stealth Armor and the Stealth suit Mk II. "It successfully turns the wearer completely invisible and nullifies all sound produced by the wearer. Further, the advanced materials drastically lower the wearer's heat signature, enough that a lower-end ALEO would be almost undetectable."

"Okay. Good... I'll need an anchor point for Mary to tap in through as well. A photon entangled link I can plug into their network," I said, starting to pace as the ideas bubbled up in my head. "I could probably hack my way through most stuff, but there is no way I could do it faster than you."

"Jay, what are you planning?" Kaytlyn asked, sounding very concerned about what I was saying. "You're not planning on... killing him, are you?"

"...no," I said after a moment, both Kayt and Jackie sagging in relief. "As much as I might want to, and as much as he might deserve it, killing Saburo to send a message would likely spiral pretty quickly. I'm not willing to flip the table quite yet. But I am going to send him a fucking message he won't be able to ignore."

"I don't think he is going to react like you think he will," Kaytlyn said. "I mean... people know he is a stone cold war dog. Rumors say that he glares down assassins and breaks most men with his words alone. Threatening him in his home is more likely to start a war than prove he shouldn't mess with us."

"Then what do you suggest I do?" I asked loudly, slamming my fist on the table. "This wasn't some jumped-up gang plan, or a job for some two-bit Fixer! This was a premeditated plan, an attack on one of us, committed by Arasaka! What if it had been your mother, Jackie? Or Misty? You said it yourself, we can *not* let this go unanswered!"

"But kicking down Saburo's front door isn't going to solve anything!" Kayt fired back. "Good, you're not going to kill him, but the second you drop our names in his lap, Arasaka is going to go to war! And maybe we come out on top of that. Maybe they can't compete with us in the long run, or hell, even the short run. But are you willing to spin the wheel on all poor fucks caught in the crossfire?"

I stared at Kaytlyn for a long minute, eyes full of anger, my fists clenched. For a long moment, I considered going ahead with my vague, not-quite-filled-out plan. It was tempting, my frustration and anger roiling behind my eyes.

Suddenly, I turned away, grabbed one of the chairs from beside the table, and slammed it down on it. The chair, which had a metal frame, made a loud clanging noise and deformed slightly. The ringing sound continued even as I hurled it across the table, where it hit the ground, bounced, and slammed into the wall. I then closed my eyes and took a few long, deep, ragged breaths. Eventually, after nearly a minute, I opened my eyes and let out a long breath.

"Fine. Going after Saburo is a bad idea," I admitted. "But we need to do something."

"Of course we do, Genio," Jackie said, stepping up from behind me and patting my back. "We just need to figure it out first, before stirring up trouble we can't afford to handle."

I nodded, trying to stop the more extreme ideas floating around in my head from blotting out more reasonable ones.

"Mary... You said this must have come from high up in the department... can you figure out which department it came from?"

"I can," She said simply. "It is a sizable department, their funding is around eight billion eddies per year... And I have figured out why they came after us. Their primary purpose is designing stealth tech."

I shook my head, internally cursing... well, just about everything involved, including myself for not being more direct in protecting my people.

"Do you know where that department is?" Kaytlyn asked, bringing me back to the moment. "Not just digitally, but physical as well."

"I do."

"... I think I have an idea."

Arasaka Facility - Osaka Prefecture, Japan

Shimomura Takeshi had worked for Arasaka for the better part of his life, nearly thirty-eight years. During his early life, he had excelled at nearly everything he did. After graduating from college, he was quickly hired as a project manager at a small Arasaka subsidiary.

His bosses were quickly impressed by his impressive ability to get results, never bothering to ask questions, simply happy with how much money he could make them. Despite their ignorance, he knew his success, even when he was young, was due to his cunning and ruthless nature. He was more than happy to bribe, blackmail, and threaten his way up the ladder. Those very bosses would come to regret their lack of oversight when they were framed for various internal crimes, which led to Takeshi's promotion.

It took him just over two decades to rise to the position he now held, and he managed to keep it through the same ruthlessness and cunning that let him claim it in the first place. As the Director of the Stealth Technologies Division, he was a powerful member of the Arasaka leadership.

Though now, standing at the entrance of one of his many laboratories, at the top level of the facility he ran, he was not sure if he would even be alive this time tomorrow, never mind retain his position. The morning had started off poorly when he received news that the Night City mercenary team had been eliminated with prejudice, the whole building wiped out. They had failed their mission, and someone had taken offense to their attempt.

His day had only gotten worse from there.

"Sir... what should we do?"

Takeshi slowly turned to look at his direct subordinate, Murata Shiro, one of eight Deputy Directors who worked under him and one of six who worked on site. He stared at him for a long moment before turning back and looking out over the large laboratory. His eyes were vacant, all emotion drained from him. This laboratory had been at the facility's highest level of security, and yet that had ultimately meant nothing.

"There is nothing to do," he admitted, his voice flat. Dead

Every screen in the facility was filled with error messages, as every single device, from their powerful computers to the systems that controlled their lights, had been wiped completely clean, formatted, filled with junk data, and then wiped again. Even systems not connected to the net, isolated and secure from netrunners, and reinforced to survive EMP attacks, had been wiped clean. The only way that could be possible was if someone had been here, in the facility. And yet none of their security had tripped.

The guards had seen nothing, and their cameras, sensors, security feeds, as well as every single other system, were wiped clean, just like everything else.

Every single floor was a repeat of this one, from the large-scale laboratories focused on refining stealth capabilities for vehicles, to the more esoteric design studios, where they were attempting more theoretical ideas. Every project, every schematic, every theory and blueprint, document and report, completely and utterly erased.

It was methodical, clean, and precise. He had even been forced to take the stairs to his office, as the elevators refused to function, their screens blank, their controls dead.

Of course, the computer systems were not the only things affected.

Every prototype and show model, every part and physical invention, was gone without a trace. Entire floors stripped of every single device being built, tested, or studied. Every engineering room was emptied, devoid of all projects.

"Sir!"

Another subordinate, the head of the building's IT department, ran into the large laboratory. He was a larger man, sweating profusely from his run up the stairs. It took him nearly a minute to catch his breath before he could finally speak again.

"Sir... the main branch is asking why you accessed the central servers," He asked, his eyes wide, fear clear on his face. "They are saying... our back-ups are gone! There's nothing left, and your access codes were what was used!"

Takeshi said nothing and felt nothing. His will, any hope that he would survive this... event, was long since destroyed, leaving him empty. Every floor, every project, every single computer had already been wiped clean. Why wouldn't the main servers also be cleared?

Silently, Takeshi turned and walked away from his subordinates, leaving the laboratory behind. Workers ran this way and that, barely pausing to bow as they passed him, all of them trying to figure out *something*, scrambling around, trying to figure out what they could do. Meanwhile, he simply continued to walk, eventually stepping into his office. He sat in his chair, idly noticing that the microadjustment it normally would have made, adapting to his sitting position to support him perfectly, were silent. A chair worth more than most families made in half a year, reduced to a simple cushioned office chair.

It took him nearly two minutes, during which he did nothing but stare ahead, to realize that there was something affixed to his computer screen. It was a slip of paper, stuck to the clean glass of his expensive monitor. He reached forward, pulling it off so he could read it.

"Dear Director Shimomura Takeshi of the Arasaka Stealth Technologies Division,"

"For every action, there is a consequence. You attempted to take our people, and now you will pay the price."

"Your Division has been erased, every project, prototype, and bit of research deleted. Your access codes, as well as those of your deputy directors, were distributed throughout the process. Records of you and your deputies conspiring with competitors, as well as preparing to escape, are already being disseminated to your homes and personal devices. We have also helped ourselves to eight hundred and fifty-three million eddies from your funding, one million for every second that Sable and Cassie Arcturus were in the care of your mercenaries. This has been routed through you and your deputy directors' various accounts, ensuring you are held responsible."

"Regards, Tinkertech Corp

"P.S. - Fuck you."

Shimomura Takeshi had barely finished reading the note when, suddenly, from where his fingers held the paper, it abruptly caught fire. It flared brightly, partially blinding him for a moment. When he opened his eyes, the paper was gone, with nothing more than a bit of soot between his fingers to show it had ever existed.

Two hours later, when a squad of Arasaka Security arrived to arrest him, they found him slumped in his chair, his personal side arm still held in his hand.