

Despite the potentially groundbreaking, earthshaking discovery, there wasn't much we could actually do with what we had learned. We proposed a few experiments we might be able to repeat with the core-bound AI to see if they could sense similar changes to their computing power, but their systems were too different to call that a repeatable result.

On top of that, we had no way to detect what was happening. None of the internal sensors we had access to were picking up anything that could explain Mary's ability to feel the changes in her computing power, and there wasn't anything I had access to that might pick up anything metaphysical. The closest to magic or anything I had seen in the tech trees I had accessed so far were psychic abilities, and those were supposedly mental, not soul-related.

Not to mention that I had missed my chance to examine them.

With no real avenue to investigate the concept, we logged our results and agreed that at some point, hopefully soon, when we had more time and maybe even had a better understanding of the fundamental forces going on, we would revisit the subject.

"Do you really think it might be because I have a soul?" Mary asked once we had finished our final experiments. "The idea just seems so... impossible."

"I honestly don't know," I admitted, scratching my chin. "But, logically, there is no reason you couldn't. You may be built differently, but our souls are more than just our bodies. Probably."

"I guess we will just have to wait and see," She said with a chuckle, going quiet as she considered what we had learned.

I patted the projector base, the closest I could get to physically touching her at the moment. After a moment or two, I looked down at the server stacks under the floor, specifically at the ten that were still off.

"Do you want those ten server stacks removed?" I asked, gesturing to the dark corner of the space.

"No, I'll keep them off, but they could come in handy if I need a quick boost," she admitted. "I could barely feel them, so they won't be a big strain if I ever need them."

"Alright," I agreed easily. "I think we will make a new Smart AI when we finish taking over the city. I still hate the idea of making a living being and immediately throwing them into chaos, so hopefully-"

I cut myself off suddenly, just barely managing to stop myself from poking at Murphy. Instead, I just shook my head and changed the subject. Thankfully, Mary seemed to understand and let me.

Some time later, Mary went back to her project of setting up a proper ambush for the Kujira. She had already selected a location, working with Naraku to find a good spot, and with Samwise to get all our custom stealth mines in place. She predicted that it would be early on the

second day of my new cycle that the *Kujira* would hit their ambush, and I promised to be awake and ready to sit in for it.

Meanwhile, I headed out to finally eat something, as I had skipped a meal, first to the panic that something might be wrong with Mary. At first, I had been afraid that my attempt at curing rampancy had backfired, and that had passed, I was enthralled with experimenting with the rather interesting revelation. I ended up catching the tired pair of David and Cassie as they ate, both of them feeling the effects of caring for three small puppies. It would get easier as the canines got older, but now they were certainly a handful, especially for younger kids.

Still, they were happy, and it was entertaining to watch them try to eat while also keeping three puppies out of trouble.

The rest of the day was spent preparing for the twelfth and final day of my break. The entire day would be dedicated to finally and officially kicking the politicians out of Night City and taking control. Sable had already moved several dozen replacements prepared for various positions, vetted and experienced people who were looking forward to the challenge and had already gotten some glimpse of what we were doing. The biggest glimpse was the reveal of the trio of Dumb AI that would be assisting them in running the city.

Sable was once again heading the operation, though her role was considerably scaled back, with the Dumb AI streamlining most of the city running to just oversight.

The process started early the following morning, with squads of Spartans, accompanied by NCPD officers, appearing at the homes of nearly eighty government officials, all of whom were asked to pack their bags and leave the city. Some of them attempted to argue, some attempted to talk their way out of it, and in fact, nearly all of them attempted to bribe the officers and my Spartans.

None of that worked, obviously.

There were some higher members of the government that we were keeping, though the list was short. Shockingly, the current mayor was on the list of people allowed to stay, though he was not remaining in this position. Instead, he would be moved to a council that would function as an advisory board, with Sable making final decisions on major issues.

Make no mistake, the city was no longer democratic, something that I was sure would piss a lot of people off. Eventually, once the situation stabilized, I was hoping to set up something more open and inclusive to people, with citizens running and being voted in. For now, however, we were in control.

Within three hours, my Spartans had escorted the majority of the corrupt, in-power politicians out of the city. Some of them drove away in their own vehicles, others waited for hired chauffeurs to arrive and drive them off, but none of them were willing to stand up to our very well-armed, seemingly unbeatable forces.

By then, our new people were already diving into the existing infrastructure, revealing deals, corruption, inefficiency, theft, and more. Mary was helping, of course, and eventually she put together a massive collection of proof, an exposé of just how *fucked* the government of Night City had been. It was available for anyone to access on the net, and was handed over to various news agencies for them to go over and verify for themselves.

Jefferson Peralez, the mayor of Night City, who again was actually a pretty decent man, looking to improve Night City for its people, had been horrified to learn just how deeply and totally the government had been broken. It was that, combined with the fact that we were already creating a list of changed laws that went miles beyond anything he would have been able to do as the mayor, that finally convinced him to go along with our plan.

He didn't have much of a choice, of course, but now he was fully working with us, rather than constantly looking for a way out. According to Sable, he was already looking forward to the city being safe enough for his daughter to visit.

Of course, all of that was the easy part. We correctly predicted that none of the politicians, seeing just how well we managed to handle Militech, would try anything stupid. The closest to any push back we got from them was one politician attempting to make an accusatory video exposing how inhuman and terrible we were being.

The only problem with that was how respectfully we actually treated them. They had absolutely nothing to complain about. Hell, we even fed them. So instead of exposing us to the public, they exposed themselves as being wildly oversensitive and whiny politicians.

Especially since after they posted their video, we added a link to all the evidence we found of them being terrible people.

All in all, shipping a bunch of soft politicians out of the city was the easy part. The difficult part was finally reaching out to the public, sharing the news, and explaining what had happened. It was this stage that could make or break everything we had achieved so far. I was already anticipating some issues and had been preparing for them, but there was a real risk that the city could spiral into some deep problems if we didn't handle the reveal properly.

I considered having Jefferson give an interview and explain that he was handing us control. I considered just sending out newsletters to explain what was happening and share information about accessing those resources. Unfortunately, those might have worked in practice, but they were more likely to convince people that this was just more of the same. That some megacorp had taken advantage of their superior tech to take what they wanted, and now ruled the city.

I had to do better. I needed to prove that this was the next step, that we had done something special, that this was an opportunity for the whole city to step forward into something new, something better.

I just needed to convince everyone to give us a chance.

So, rather than addressing people from the impressive view of my office in Apollo Tower, or standing triumphant in the Militech Offices, I went for something a bit more humble. We headed out into the Badlands, found a spot with a good view of the city in the background, and set up some cameras and a stool for me to sit on. I put on the more subdued version of my black-and-gold corpo outfit, sat on the stool, and talked.

"Citizens of Night City, a lot has happened in the last few weeks, and I think it's about time we had a talk," I said, looking into the camera. "I know you must have a lot of questions, but I imagine a good place to start is with 'what and why?' What we are doing, and why we are doing it. Both of those questions have deceptively simple answers, deceptive because while they may seem straightforward on the surface, the effects they could have on this city are astounding, and a lot of that comes down to you."

I flattened out my jacket, a fidget that I quickly stopped before it got distracting.

"So, let's start with the what. In short, we have been cleaning this city. My group, an eclectic bunch of people from most walks of life, has been slowly but surely cutting out the worst elements of our home. We started with Maelstrom, removing them from Watson so that we could start building there. We then cut out the scavs, because they were a stain on humanity. We then moved on to Tyger Claws and then 6th Street Gang. Both the Mox and the Valentinos have been decriminalized, cutting out anything beyond neighborhood watches and outreach to groups who need their support."

As I talked, I could see Mary adding a map in real time, via the screen facing me. This wasn't live, but she was giving me a preview of what the final version would look like. As I talked, the map shifted and started showing what areas we were clearing out.

"As we cut out the cancers that were killing Night City, we were buying land to build new, improved homes and more. Your neighbors are even helping to build them. These apartments will have reasonable rent, and are protected by our own security forces. Then we were attacked by Militech and were forced to remove them as well."

A few images showing the fight against Militech appeared, showing some of the more open and heavily recorded moments.

"Now, Militech is no longer bleeding the city dry. They are no longer crushing its citizens to make a quick buck. They are no longer funding gangs to create instability," I continued. "And now, we will be setting ultimatums for all companies working in Night City. They are no longer above the law. They can no longer influence the law. They will follow the rules that protect innocent citizens like you, or they aren't welcome in our city."

I took a moment to pause, shifting gears a bit to talk about even more recent events, letting Mary switch the images and info beside me on the screen.

"Speaking of laws and rules, it's time to explain what has been happening with the NCPD and the activity many of you may have seen this morning. As of just a few days ago, the NCPD is no longer a privatized police force. They no longer have a board, and they no longer

have a bottom line. The old leaders have been removed via an internal coup, with our assistance. They are now led by Commissioner Drake, a seasoned member of the force known for being just and fair. Under her command, they have removed the corrupted elements, and the NCPD once again serves the people. As does the government.”

I paused for a moment, knowing that this was really where we could make or break ourselves.”

“This morning, my people once more spread out through the city, this time accompanied by the newly cleaned NCPD. We went to the homes of the corrupt and crooked members of the Night City government, and politely asked them to leave the city. As of two hours ago, we are running Night City. Proof of their corruption, which went even deeper than I could have imagined, will be readily available on the net. The government has now completely shifted to be under our control, so that we can continue moving forward to a better tomorrow, not just for some, but for everyone.”

The feed I could see shifted, showing that the graphics that Mary had been adding in real time faded, leaving just me on screen.

“Now that you know just a little bit more about the 'what', it's time to talk about the why. I will start with the short answer. We are doing all of this because we believe that Night City could be so much more. This city was built on dreams, and its people have never stopped trying to make their way forward, even when their government, their businesses, or even their neighbors failed them. I know that this city can do better. It just needs a little help to make it happen. That's why we have been clearing out gangs, clearing out corruption, and building infrastructure.”

I paused for another moment, leaning back in the stool slightly, putting my hands on my knees.

“Now, when I first started talking, I mentioned that some of this is up to you. Well, I wasn't lying. The truth is, I know how crazy this all is. I know how scary it sounds, about how dangerous it sounds. I know that the casualties from our fight with Militech left a bad taste in your mouths. I wish that it hadn't been necessary, but they attacked Rocky Ridge directly, putting the many innocent people who lived there in danger. They were clearly never going to agree to the changes we are making, so they needed to be removed...”

I stop, letting out a breath, taking a moment to reorganize my thoughts. I was leaning heavily on my improved mind, delivering a speech from the heart that I hoped the citizens of Night City could see.

“The point is, I know you've been burned. I know that the leaders of Night City and the megacorps that infected it have spent decades abusing your trust, taking advantage of you, and draining you dry. I know you have no reason to trust us, so I won't ask you to. So, prepare for the worst, look out for us being shady. Warn your kids to be wary of our soldiers, count your eddies when you come to our stores. You've got no reason to trust us, so don't.”

I stared into the camera as if I were looking at the people on the other side. Like I was trying to talk to them directly.

"What I'm asking for is the chance to *earn* your trust. We are starting from nothing. Hell, we are starting from *worse* than nothing with all the shit you've been through. But all we are asking for is, instead of rioting, instead of refusing to work with us, give us a chance. Be suspicious as all hell, but please, hold off your reactions until we have a chance to prove we want to make Night City into what it should have been from the start."

I paused, partly to gather my thoughts and partly for dramatic effect.

"If you give us a chance to prove ourselves, if we can work together, I know that we can turn this city into something amazing," I said, letting out a long breath, before looking back into the camera. "For now, I think that is everything we can say. More updates will come in the future, thank you for listening. I hope you have a good day."

I paused for a moment, waiting for the camera to shut off, before looking over at Sable, Jackie, Misty, Kayt, Riggs, and Gloria, who had all come at my request. At that point, I had done a few different takes, guided by a vague outline rather than a word-for-word speech.

"So... what do you think?"

"Any PR person you hired would be pulling their hair out," Sable commented, though with a smile rather than a frown. "It was very you."

"I think it sounded genuine," Jackie added. "Asking for trust directly would have been a mistake. This feels..."

"More honest. More reasonable too," Misty finished, and Jackie nodded, kissing his fiancé on the top of her head.

"Maybe a bit on the pleading side," Kaytlyn said next. "But it wasn't bad. Not much else you could say at this point."

"Well... if that's it, then that's it," I said, letting out a sigh, "Mary?"

"I'll put some finishing touches in it," she said, projected through a portable projector beside the camera rig. "An intro and outright effect, some more details with the graphics."

"Thanks."

With our task done, the MRVNs packed up the equipment, and we rode back on a pair of transport warthogs, with Kaytlyn and Jackie behind the wheels. Technically speaking, we were never in any danger, since all of us could have been back in the bunker with just a single command from Mary, but we still cleared the desert with drones and Spartan squads first.

We were still targets for basically every megacorp in the world, after all.



By the time we got back, Mary was already finishing up the video. We watched it a few times, adjusting a few smaller things with the AI's help. Thankfully, she had understood my intent, and she hadn't over-edited it. I was internally terrified the whole video would come off like a corporate apology or something, which was why I had made sure not to preach trust.

We released the recorded statement at two in the afternoon, Mary using her essentially unbeatable infiltration skills to put the message just about everywhere. We were even considering hacking into screens across the city, even putting it up on the holoprojectors, but we eventually decided that it would be a step too far and send the wrong message. Less fireside chat and more we control the horizontal and vertical.

Unsurprisingly, once the video went out, the reaction rolled around pretty quickly.

The first thing to happen was that a good portion of the city's population was pulled off the street. Anyone with two bits of sense could tell what was about to happen, so all across the city, people were hunkering down, peering out of their windows to watch the potentially approaching storm.

Then people started to step out. Groups formed, first a few, then more. The old adage that a person is smart, but people are stupid, rang true because, as the groups grew in size, they started to play off one another. The shouts of discontent started to rise, egged on by people who were scared or had been affected by our swift removal of the gangs that plagued the city.

It was expected, we saw it coming, and we were prepared.

Honestly, the most surprising part was that most of the groups didn't immediately resort to violence and rioting.

As the groups got larger and larger, they started to move, congregating and merging with others, getting louder and louder. So we engaged our first attempt to diffuse the situation.

We started handing out free food.

We tracked the smaller groups as they moved and set up rows and rows of barbecue grills, cooking up chicken, hot dogs, and hamburgers. We heated up vats of noodles, hundreds and hundreds of pizzas, and boxes of candy, basically anything we could make quickly. The smaller groups, heading toward places like the hotel, Gemini Towers, Militech Offices, and many of our other properties across the city, stumbled onto a small army of robots handing out boxes of food.

It worked *shockingly well*. Back home, it would have probably pissed people off more and been seen as patronizing, but here, people could go their whole lives without eating anything that even approached the quality of food we could produce. Those who had sampled things like real meat did so sparingly because it was insanely expensive. And here we were, handing it out for free.

The groups actually got bigger in some locations, as people came out from their homes to enjoy the free food. As people ate, the angry, scared vibes started to slow and dissipate.

Of course, that didn't work everywhere.

When one of the largest groups merged with another significantly large gathering along the sound barrier fence that ran along the beach and hotel, they stormed right past the free food, tipping over electric grills and smashing quite a few robots. They tried to shove their way through the entrance to the hotel and beach, smashing vehicles and graffitiing walls.

We held back until someone threw a Molotov cocktail. Then we reacted.

In just a few seconds, the fire was extinguished, and a knockout gas filled the streets around the hotel, knocking nearly a thousand people out in just a few seconds. Then we deployed a horde of stealth Spartans, most of whom had been following the growing groups the whole time. They quickly picked up the people and carried them away, distributing them two blocks back, spread out as much as possible. When they all woke up, eight minutes had passed. They were completely unharmed and wondering how the hell they had ended up so far back.

The group shrank considerably at that point, but it was still large enough to try pushing past the entrance twice more. Each time, we simply knocked them out again and moved them back even further.

This was not the most violent group, though. One of the groups, one making their way to a seemingly random apartment complex, flipped a switch in a way that looked almost unnatural. One minute, it was just some slightly above-average civil unrest, the next, some of them were wielding guns, firing into the air, and braying for violence loudly as they headed towards one of the several police precincts.

I was willing to excuse a lot of bad behavior because, if I was being honest, I didn't blame them. If the situation were reversed, I probably would have been making dumb choices, too. It's why we had worked so hard to disperse the groups before they became a problem.

But charging headfirst, looking to start a conflict that would stain the street red, was far beyond any line I could accept.

We applied the same knockout gas as we had used in other locations, but for this group, and a few others that were looking to kick up more than just protest and a little riot, we were not just going to peacefully remove them.

When the gas had worked, anybody brandishing a weapon was separated from the group and arrested, from a particularly nasty-looking knife, all the way up to automatic weapons. The rest of the people were spread out all over the city, forcing the group apart as passively as we could at that stage.

For six hours, we chased fights, put out fires, and arrested anyone putting others in danger.

We also repaired damage as we went.



Cars were fixed or replaced, broken windows were patched, damaged screens or ruined machines were repaired and working again within minutes of being broken. We even cleaned the streets behind the wandering mobs, with hundreds of drones collecting trash.

Eventually, after eight hours of people walking the city's streets, scared and lashing out, they seemed to realize they weren't doing anything. Any group just protesting was being ignored, any group being destructive was completely ineffective, and any group looking to do harm was carefully dismantled, and the offenders were taken away.

A total of forty-three injuries occurred over the entire time, and none of them were worse than simple fractures, and even better, none of them were caused by our people.

As night set, the few remaining groups lost steam and began to fall apart. We still had drones patrolling almost every single inch of the city, our Spartan teams were still heavily guarding our projects, and Mary was still scanning for any external threats coming to us, but things were calming down.

It seemed that, for the moment, we had managed to avoid city-wide rioting and uprising.

Which was good, because by the time the city was calm, the day was winding down, and I was about to pick up my next tech tree. As the day passed into the night, Samwise, Sable, Cassie, and I ended up on the surface of Avalon. We were sitting on the same hill we had brought the nomad leaders to, where we had first landed, and under which was the vault. There, technically, it was already past what we called midnight, but thankfully, the system ran on Earth time, so we were simply watching the stars and the two moons, waiting for the countdown to turn over.

Cassie, who had just spent an hour or so running around with the puppies, had plopped down on a patch of grass and was now sound asleep with all three of the dogs lying on her.

The rest of us sat in relative silence, Sable leaning against me as we waited.

Finally, the countdown reached zero, and I felt it detach from my brain, the new tech tree slotting into place a moment later. Immediately, I dove in, desperate to figure out what I had unlocked. This was the first subject I had unlocked after figuring out my new time limit, so it felt like I was setting the tone for... something.

As I searched through the branches, I could see that... almost all of it was already unlocked. It was all old, very old, like World War II era, maybe just a bit later. There was *nothing* worth building from the general concepts, until a flash of strangely complicated clockwork and automation flashed by. A flying drone, with a shockingly detailed control mechanism... that ran on gasoline.

A security system that used liquids?

Underwater building methods and pressure systems that were insanely robust?

In a flash, I finally found the start of a branch I couldn't see, then another, and another. At the heart were two massive biotech branches, both of them starting with a single creation, one that was actually black boxed.

It was [ADAM](#).

"So... how does it look?" Sable asked as I stared off into space. "You don't look too depressed.

"I... Well, it's going to be interesting," I admitted, my brain trying to recall all of the tech from the iconic video game world. "Samwise, would you kindly call Frank, tell him to clear a large space in the biolab. We are going to need it."