

As I stepped into the security viewing center, I was taken aback by how much it had changed. The room, which dipped below ground level, had doubled in size and now had several different stations. One of the stations, the one with Murtaugh sitting behind it, was the largest by far, while the other stations were currently off. Murtaugh was scanning through aerial footage of the desert around the town, overlaid with a visual representation of our sensor net.

"Murtaugh, how's it going?" I asked, sitting down in an empty chair and rolling towards his station. "Everything looking alright?"

Murtaugh was, by far, the least social of the AIs I had created, despite everyone's best efforts. He was also the most... robotic of the group, with little doubt in my mind that the two were directly connected. We had attempted to include him in our various activities, inviting him to our gatherings and trying to pull him out of the security building, before and after the new building had been built. Despite all of that, he seemed most comfortable inside, keeping us all safe. He had confirmed several times that he was satisfied and that he was not overworked. Samwise still had two Dumb AI's working to simplify and monitor all of the incoming data, so that Murtaugh wasn't overwhelmed, and could actually leave the building occasionally.

Not that he did.

"Sir, our sensor net is stable, no breaches that we can detect," He said confidently. "The Spartans are significantly more efficient than the shades. I look forward to running operations with them."

"I do too, they will be our primary forces for quite some time, I think," I revealed, leaning back in the chair. "You have a moment to go over the space net?"

Murtaugh nodded, tapping on a keyboard to bring up a different series of maps, these ones of the area around Earth. He adjusted the scans a bit, revealing several dozen different data points spread out around a large map of the solar system.

"The sensor grid is still being expanded. We have several satellites set to enter orbits around Mars, Mercury, Venus, and the rest," He explained, showing a bevy of green dots on the map, each shown to be moving away from Earth at different angles and planes. "But with what's already in place, we already have a good idea of what's directly orbiting around Earth."

"These are the O'Neill Cylinders," He said, pointing to four different marks. "There are four of them in total, one in orbit around the moon, the others at various [Earth-Moon Lagrange points](#). One and two are run by the Highriders, while three and four are run by the [ESA](#). There is also the Crystal Palace, stationed about halfway between the Moon and Earth, as well as over a hundred other smaller satellites, ranging from small pods to several zero-G factories."

"What about armed stations?" I asked.

"We have radiological scans from nearly two dozen of them, consistent with nuclear devices," He explained, his voice steady despite the impact of what he was saying. "Some of the images we've captured suggest that even more of the close orbit satellites are armed in

some way, with many weapons pointed downward. It seems like the major nations and companies have reinvented [MAD](#), this time with space-based weapons."

"And off-planet mass drivers?"

"There are three, one by [Tycho](#), another by [Copernicus](#), and one by an Arasaka settlement, all three on the moon," Murtaugh responded. "I should point out that the Arasaka mass driver does not exist on public record."

"Bastards, all of them. Floating around in space, holding the whole world hostage several times over," I said, shaking my head. "Finding a way to neutralize all of those weapons is a priority task."

"It will have to be a single concerted effort," Samwise pointed out. "Breaking the stalemate by blowing up a single target will likely end up with the remaining ones unloading their payload, be it nuclear or kinetic."

"Well... It's something we can likely accomplish by throwing resources at it," I pointed out. "Maybe we can design a tiny drone, packed with explosives? Deploy thousands of them and then give them a month to get into position?"

"If they are small enough and covered with the right materials, they would be nearly impossible to detect," Samwise pointed out, expanding on my idea. "I will investigate the plausibility of that idea, as well as any alternatives."

"Thanks. Alright, I'm due for surgery at around noon, assuming the treatments to my doppelgangers went well," I said. "When I wake up tomorrow, I'll chip in on the work list."

"Should you not be taking it easy as your body recovers?" Samwise asked a question mark appearing on his chest screen. "Frank will not be happy if you push yourself when he instructed bed rest."

"I'll be lying in bed, using my computer interface," I explained, shaking my head. "Not much different from lying around, watching TV."

We spent another hour or so in the security room, watching some of the closer scans we had of the many objects orbiting the Earth. We had one satellite dedicated to the Crystal Palace, the massive, multi-layered station often described as Las Vegas in space. I had to admit, I didn't quite understand the size of the station until I could see it for myself. It wasn't nearly as large as the O'Neill Cylinders, but it was still massive, large enough to house its own small city.

About an hour after we arrived, Samwise and I left the Security hub, leaving Murtagh to his domain. I still wished I could do something to help him, but in his own way, the AI seemed happy, so there wasn't much I was willing to do, beyond keep checking up on him to confirm he was still doing well. Technically, I could order him to leave, find a hobby, talk with more people, but that didn't quite feel right. Despite his literal young age, he was more or less an adult and capable of making his own decisions. He would have a better grasp of his development than I,

including knowing what was likely holding him back. Ultimately, it was his choice, and I needed to respect that.

The rest of the morning passed relatively quickly. Samwise and I split up, with me heading down to my workshop while he headed out of his own workshop to work on his own projects. Meanwhile, our probes were being produced as we spoke, with the first batch of twenty on target to be completed sometime while I was under anesthesia that afternoon.

Samwise would launch the exploratory probes without my oversight, since I would be too busy being unconscious, and we had a schedule to keep. Plus, I wasn't really interested in the launch, as the arrival at their destination was *much* more interesting.

Before that, however, I had some time to kill, so I started working on producing the appropriate equipment for our Spartan legions. At the moment, they were being armed with our [standard mag rifle](#), but I wanted to make sure that they had the best I could provide. So, I went over the plans, tweaking a few things here or there. My intention was to make sure that the weapon could handle the same amount of punishment that I designed their MJOLNIR armor to withstand, which I did with only a slight increase in weight. The basic design remained the same, but now they could rely on their primary weapon as they did their armor.

They still needed a better variety of weapons, which meant improving the shotgun, submachine gun, and at least one melee weapon, but that would happen over time. Samwise had already given our [standard pistol](#) the same strengthening treatment I gave the rifle, so at least they were carrying a complete loadout, even if it was limited.

When we eventually switched most of our forces over to plasma, we would likely end up mixing in laser and mag weapons as well, just to cover all our bases. Certain situations called for different weapon types, so standard loadouts would likely keep a variety on each Spartan. This would hopefully keep them from being caught flat-footed with a weapon that wasn't very effective against a specific enemy type. Not to mention that at this point, we had access to so many different types of lasers that they were rapidly approaching the effectiveness of our other powerful weapons.

Eventually, Frank sent me a message that Vik had arrived, so it was time to head to his lab. Vik would be overseeing our operations, partially as a spare set of hands, but also because he was genuinely curious about the process, and Jackie considered him to be his primary doctor.

After cleaning up and changing into simple clothes, I headed to Frank's lab, where Vik, Jackie, and Mister were already waiting. Frank was there, of course, but it was his lab, so that was expected. Our AI surgeon was examining the control systems for the organ transport vessels, which were smallish tanks built to nourish and stabilize our custom-made organs. I could see a whole array, ready to be put inside Jackie and me, floating neutrally in a clear-faced tank.

As I entered the room, I could see Misty and Jackie were having a bit of a connected moment, hugging and whispering to each other before Jackie went under the knife.

"Hey, Jackie, Misty, Vik," I said with a nod. "Where's the little gremlin?"

"Rebecca? She's with David," Vik said absently, examining one of the organs, hooked up inside its vessel. "Something about bowling and go karts."

"Fair enough," responded with a chuckle and nodded, watching the two experts prepare for a moment before speaking up again. "So what do you think, Vik?"

"I think this is incredible," he admitted, finally looking up to focus on me. "I read the pamphlet from Frank, and the stats you are getting from all this are insane. Even better, since the custom-replaced organs don't seem to have an impact on a person's mind... It's actually a pretty lightweight build. At the second level at least, level three isn't something I would recommend for anyone not particularly well suited to cyberware and bioware."

"And level four?"

"That is insane for a whole other reason," He said with a snort. "I didn't think I would see the day of a completely viable Bio-borg method. It's been tried, but we just don't have the precision for biological full-body replacements yet. Well, until now at least."

"All of the levels are possible through the culmination of several bouts of inspiration, as well as all of Frank's hard work," I explained with a confident smirk. "I would be a bit disappointed if they *weren't* so much more advanced."

"Oh, sorry, just a couple of months to develop cyber and bioware that blows everything else away," Vik said, rolling his eyes good-naturedly. "God forbid it only slightly revolutionizes the entire field."

I chuckled, shaking my head as I turned to check in with Jackie, who was now sitting a bit more openly on the bench, though he was still holding Misty's hand, clearly comforting his partner.

"How do you feel?" I asked, slapping his shoulder before Misty stood and gave me a hug.

"Weak," he said, a bit of annoyance leaking into his voice. "It's been a long time since I've been down a muscle weave for more than an hour. And that was to replace an old one with something better."

"He had to ask one of the robots to open a jar for him this morning," she said, a big smirk on her face as she laughed, Jackie looking at her with an overly dramatic look of betrayal.

"It's not my fault, the cover was wet!" he said, exasperated but clearly accepting the ribbing in the nature it was intended. "They have rubber fingers!"

"Of course, of course," I agreed with a chuckle, smiling alongside Misty. "You up after me?"

"That's what Frank said," he confirmed with a nod, leaning back against the wall behind him. "No offense, but I'm happy to let him get as much experience as possible before I'm up."

"It's not like I'll be first," I pointed out. "He already performed the process on my biological doppelgangers. Besides, you know Frank, do you really think he would call the development done, never mind allow us to get the treatment and implants, if they were still dangerous?"

"No... Guay, when did we switch places, Genio?" He asked, shaking his head and letting out a grumbling breath. "I'm not such a baby about chrome!"

"You're just off center, babe," Misty pointed out, putting her head on his shoulder. Most of your chrome is gone, no one blames you for being on edge."

"... Feels like I'm walking around without my iron," he admitted, pointedly looking away, watching Vik and Frank prepare. "Not a fan of feeling so defenseless."

"I don't blame you, I'm feeling a bit light without my implants as well," I admitted. "You'll feel better once you're bench pressing small cars in your new power suit."

Jackie chuckled and nodded, clearly enjoying that image. We sat and chatted for about ten more minutes before Frank and Vik were finally ready to start. After stripping down to my boxers, I made my way to the surgery suite, climbing onto the table while Frank stood by, ready to help if needed.

"Alright, Jay, I know you read the information already, but just to-"

The rest of the AI's words were drowned out as the holoprojector along the corner of the lab lit up, Mary appearing above it. It flashed bright enough to capture everyone's attention, and Mary's clearly agitated state was already concerning.

"Jackson! We have a problem," She said, with clear worry and anxiety on her face. "Sable has been abducted."

I jumped off the gurney, nearly knocking Frank over in the process. I stepped closer, my heart dropping out of my chest to my stomach.

"What happened?" I demanded. "What happened!?"

"She was visiting her niece, and they were both grabbed," she explained quickly. "Murtaugh noticed a large spike in adrenaline through her comms watch and emergency monitoring implant, so he contacted me. I hacked into the building's security cameras to see what was happening when she didn't respond to calls."

"Meet back at the serenity building then," I said, already jogging out the door. "I'm teleporting there now."

As I ran from the lab, it exploded into activity behind me, people cursing and following me out. I nearly jumped through the teleporter, stumbling as I navigated the slightly unfamiliar

building until I reached the familiar section, the path that led to Murtaugh. Counting my blessings that I had just been shown the way earlier in the day, I slid to a stop in the large, screen-filled security monitoring room. I was surprised to find Riggs and Kaytlyn already looking over Murtaugh's shoulder. Mary was projected nearby as well.

"Mary?" I said, breathing a bit heavily. "Show me the footage."

"Right," she said, gesturing to one of the larger screens. "Playing it now."

A video of decent quality lit up the screen, showing Sable stepping out of a high-end apartment, one that was clearly well-maintained and spacious. She smiled and stopped to turn around, a younger girl stepped out from the unseen apartment to give her a hug. From further down the hall, one of the doors opened, and suddenly five armed individuals stepped out, with four more coming into view from the opposite direction. They were dressed in black combat armor of some kind, all of them wearing helmets to cover their faces. They moved like trained soldiers, with precision and confidence in every step that belied extensive experience and training.

"That was clearly planned out," I said, Kaytlyn nodding in agreement. "We need to get everyone important here, now. Is anyone off base?"

"Mama Welles is the only one in the know not here," Riggs explained, just as Jackie, Misty, and Vik joined us.

"Jackie, call your mom, tell her to find the nearest place she can't be seen. We are teleporting her now," I said, the larger man's eyes going wide as he stepped out of sight, already making the call.

I turned back to the video and watched in mounting horror as one of the soldiers grabbed Sable's shoulder roughly. The moment she realized something was wrong, Sable moved, flicking her hand out, her nails suddenly three inches longer. With a smooth motion, she cut off the hand of the man who grabbed her, before driving the tip of her finger into and through his eye.

The man dropped like his strings had been cut, but before she could take on anyone else, one of the soldiers coming from behind blurred and slammed his fist into her side, before grabbing her by the head and slamming an injection into her, causing her to slouch almost immediately. A third soldier came up from behind and wrapped her in some sort of thick blanket, zipping her up. A fourth did the same to Cassie, the young woman clearly screaming and shouting until she was given an injection as well.

As both Cassie and Sable were being dragged away, one of the soldiers turned inside and fired into the apartment, barely even slowing down. The same soldier grabbed the one Sable had killed, including the amputated limb, and followed after the others. I could only watch as they turned down the hall and vanished.

"I'm tracking them in real time, I won't lose them," Mary assured me. "They have a pair of netrunners covering their tracks, but I have them isolated, skimming off their hack."

"What about her bracelet. We can track it," I pointed out, only for Murtaugh to shake his head and gesture to the screen, showing a list of watched, one of which, Sables, was blinking.

"We can't. We are receiving all the info that runs through the quantum link, but outbound signals aren't getting through whatever they covered her with," The AI explained. "And we can't track the watch with the quantum signal, it's not a broadcast."

"Fuck, okay. We still have their emergency links, right? We can teleport them out?" I asked, sagging when Murtaugh nodded. "Fantastic. Okay, then let's get them out."

Murtaugh nodded, focusing on his computer for a few seconds of rapid typing. I could see him accessing the controls for emergency teleport, though I knew the emergency teleport system linked up to a different room, one Samwise and Noah specially designed for the process. Before he could activate it, the system blinked red and froze, a blue "X" running across the screen.

"Sorry to stop you like that, Jackson, but Sable is currently traveling in a vehicle, one of several driving through Night City," Mary revealed, footage from a security camera tracking a caravan of four vehicles moving together, all of them black [Emperors](#). "If we teleport them out now, their captors will notice immediately. News will spread. If they are as professional as we think, they will probably even have footage."

"And?" I asked, shaking my head. "I am not about to let that stop me from getting them the hell out of there! Murtaugh-

"I'm not saying we let them hurt them, I'm monitoring their bodies constantly," The powerful AI revealed, the screen blinking blue again. "Both are sedated, but they are still perfectly healthy. They probably won't be awake for at least thirty minutes."

I visibly restrained myself from snapping at Mary. I could feel the override codes, the ones buried deep inside her secondary dumb AI subconscious, sitting heavily on my tongue, but I held myself back. After taking a long breath, I finally looked over at her projection.

"What are you suggesting?" I asked simply, not looking away.

"The fact that they didn't just gun them down means they took them for a reason," She pointed out. "If we move the Spartans into position, we have them sweep in and burn the place down to the ground. Meanwhile, I scrape the entire location, the people, the vehicles, down even deeper. In the confusion, we teleport them out, safe and sound. If done in concert, no one will be able to tell what happened to them."

"... I have a Spartan squad ready and waiting," Murtaugh said. "I moved them down to the VTOL launching area when the emergency first came through. I can have them following from above in two minutes."

Before I could say anything, Kaytlyn tuned in.

"It does sound the best way to keep them safe and keep our ace in the hole," She said with a wince. "Bring up their vitals, we can watch them. If they get hurt, we bring them back immediately, no hesitation."

I frowned, battling my instincts. The implants everyone had, including Cassie and Sable, were based on Pipboy tech, which meant we could basically monitor everything that was going on with their bodies with just a small implant. That meant that the second they were being injured, even if it was only something small, we would know near instantly. Still, everything was telling me to bring them back now, to say fuck the consequences. Unfortunately, Kaytlyn and Mary had a point. They were taken for a reason, most likely to try and get leverage or information on our workings, which meant, for now, they were safe.

Now was not the time for rash actions.

"...Fine. But I don't want any delays," I said, shaking my head. "I want the Spartans above them at all times. I want them ready to drop the second we can. And I want you, Mary, in place to assist, especially in distracting the soldiers."

"Of course."

Over the next five minutes, Mary kept the large vehicles on screen, scraping footage from traffic cams, security cams, and even hacking into an ATM to watch them. Murtaugh directed the Spartan-filled VTOL to launch, the ship getting into position in just under two minutes.

Eventually, after another three minutes of driving, the train of vehicles pulled into a nondescript building, just on the outskirts of the city center, along the edge of Haywood. It was three stories tall, built from faded and probably cheap materials, and covered in graffiti. It matched the rest of the buildings on the street almost exactly. The only thing that set it apart was a ramp leading down to what you could assume was an underground parking garage, and a homeless man sitting alongside it in the alley.

Or we assumed he was homeless, until the large vehicles arrived. Then he very clearly nodded, activated something, and the garage bay door opened at the bottom of the ramp. The building was a video dead zone, but we watched from a group of seven invisible, silent drones, all of which had moved into position as we tracked the large vehicles.

"Okay, I'm making my way through the city's data centers... there is a lot of bandwidth going through that building... and according to the power company, quite a bit extra power too," Mary said, mostly dictating her actions to keep us up to date. "Okay, I'm in the building's security."

"That easy?" Kaytlyn asked with a frown.

"By human standards, no," Mary explained absently, putting up nearly two dozen video feeds at once. "Technically, I'm bouncing data through the two netrunners' own cyberware."

"How are you doing that?"

"I wiped out the operating system on their cyberdecks and took control," Mary explained. "Now I'm spoofing their capabilities in real time to fool them, while using them as a staging point to hack through to the rest of the building."

Her explanation made Kaytlyn's eyes go wide, and I couldn't help but feel a bit of pride for Mary's advanced abilities. Still, I was mostly focused on the internal security feeds.

It was *very* obvious that this was not a normal apartment building. The interior first floor could pass for one from some angles, but the moment you stepped off the set, you were greeted by what was clearly a forward operating base of some kind. There were nearly fifteen other soldiers inside, all of them heavily chromed, and that wasn't including the large group coming in from outside.

Even worse, all the chrome these people were rocking wasn't the hodgepodge crap most gangers or edgerunners went with. All of it was clearly specifically chosen for each soldier, enhancing their abilities and shoring up weaknesses. There were also three separate borgs spread out through the structure.

The building was not just the three exposed floors, either. Under the parking garage, which was bigger than you would expect compared to the rest of the building, the security cameras revealed four more floors. There was an armory filled with weapons, a security monitoring room, and, on the bottom floor, several holding cells.

That's where Sable and Cassie ended up, placed in one large cell with surprising care. I suppose properly trained soldiers know better than to toss important targets around like sacks of potatoes. The heavy blankets, which had previously been blocking our tracking signals, were removed. Unfortunately, the signals did not suddenly appear, meaning they were still being blocked, most likely from the building. Still, we had all the information we needed from Mary's hacking, and our quantum connection was still in place.

"Okay, the netrunners are busy cleaning up any footage they missed," Mary said, shaking her head. "Not that they actually deleted any."

"Any ideas who these guys are?" I asked, watching the screens closely.

"A Japanese mercenary group," Mary responded easily. "A deniable asset used by a variety of people. Already made a dozen positive IDs."

"Who hired them?"

"It's impossible to say for certain at the moment..." she answered, tracking off for a moment before continuing. "But I'm seeing a lot of work in line with the Japanese branches of Arasaka. They seem to be a repeat customer."

"When this is done, I want you to prove or disprove that link, Mary," I said, my eyes not pulling off from the screens, watching Sable and Cassie lie in their cells, still unconscious. "Scorched earth, I don't care what you have to do, just don't get caught."

"Yes, sir."

"For now, we focus on this," I said, glancing down at Murtaugh. "Are they in position?"

"Ready to go," Murtaugh said, focused on his setup. I could see, over his shoulder, a much more abstract representation of the building, with red dots representing the soldiers.

I could also see the drones marked in blue, and the VTOL, which was filled with green.

"Wait," Kaytlyn said, leaning forward to look at some of the info coming in. "Mary, what can you do to isolate Sable and Cassie?"

"I can lock the cell doors tight, as well as the door leading to the holding cell area," She responded. "I can do it right after I kill the netrunners."

"Mary, work with Murtaugh. Being able to control the building is a solid advantage for the Spartan squad," I pointed out. "But yes, seal them off as best you can."

Mary's projection nodded, while Murtaugh ordered the VTOL to descend above the building. The drones descended as well, giving us an even better look at the building. Honestly, without the peek inside, I would have never even looked twice at the apartments.

"Okay, we are in position," Murtaugh confirmed. "You have the first move."

"Taking out the netrunners."

The security footage from the server room, which was unsurprisingly where the two netrunners were stationed, was built around their two coolant pods. Meant to keep their bodies chilled while they pushed their cyberdecks to the max, the pods became their tombs when Mary did something to their power systems, overloading them and dumping the power into their coolant, cooking them alive in seconds.

We could see them thrash through their pod doors.

"Netrunners down, unsealing the building, cutting lights, and turning security turrets against them," Mary said. "Closing off the detention center."

"Acknowledged. Spartans are moving."