

Thankfully, once it was decided that we would reach out to some of the gangs and give them the opportunity to back down from their illegal activities and downsize to something that wasn't likely to spiral into a threat, organizing those meetings wasn't overly complicated. We put the word out to several known 6th Street members that we wanted to meet with their leaders, and Jackie spoke with Padre about meeting the Valentinos' higher-ups. With the obvious connection, it was no surprise that the Valentinos responded first, agreeing to a meeting with my team. Jackie suggested we "reserve" the top floor of his restaurant, which would give us a great place to meet that was relatively neutral.

Yes, we owned it, but it wasn't someplace deep in our territory or surrounded by our people. At least, it didn't appear to be, though there was a teleport receiver in one of the basement closets, and reinforcements could be on sight in less than a minute.

Apparently, Jackie actually knew one of the leaders quite well, a Gustavo Orta, the cousin of the gang's actual leader, Campo Orta, who was currently in jail. Several more leaders would be there, and with a little finagling, we managed to orchestrate a video feed for Campo. It wouldn't be for very long, so we would wait some time before connecting to him, which honestly worked out since Jackie was cooking for everyone, and subjecting the man to everyone enjoying an amazing meal while he was stuck eating prison food sounded like torture.

It took a day to organize, and by the night of the fourth day, we were waiting for them to arrive on the second floor of Jackie's restaurant. Sable, Gloria, Kayt, Riggs, and Rebecca were all there as well, though the latter two were there as "security" and were sitting back at other tables. Meanwhile, we were sitting at a longer table, already set though empty of food.

At the scheduled time, Padre stepped in first, nodding as he spotted us, his lone bodyguard following behind him. Jackie, who was working in the kitchen, took time to guide him to a seat.

"Thank you, my son," the older man said, sitting down in his chair. Behind him, his own bodyguard sat down, eyes on all of my people. "I thank you for hosting us, Jackson. I am excited to try Jackie's cooking."

"If nothing else, we will all enjoy that," I admitted. "Thank you for coming, and for helping set this up."

"I had to do very little. Your actions have made quite the impact, mentioning that you wish to meet got a lot of attention."

"All of it good, I'm sure," I responded, chuckling a bit at his telling silence.

A trio of robots brought up the first dish, an appetizer of guacamole and tortillas. I could see Padres' eyes go wide, caught off guard by the quality of the dish.

Not long after that, the leaders of the Valentinos arrived, about eight people in total. As they approached, I stood.

"Thank you all for coming," I said, gesturing to the still empty seats. "Please, sit. Jackie had worked hard on a meal, so we should leave business until after."

As they sat down, they shared introductions and helped themselves to the dip. Of course, all of them were shocked by the quality of what Jackie was serving. As more food was brought out, all of it Mexican and Hispanic in origin, the group was stunned. One of them, Jackie's friend [Gustavo Orta](#), thanked Jackie as he sat down.

"Amigo, this is... we had rumors of the food you were creating, and all of us had tried the sandwiches being sold from stories..." he started. "This looks incredible."

"Thank you, Gus, cooking and making food has... well, it's become a passion," he admitted with a smile. "Jackson has been supporting me, and with some of our friends, we have made a lot of amazing food. All of the base ingredients, the avocados, the flour, the corn, even the meat and cheese, are made artificially by a method we developed, and yet they taste nearly identical to the real thing."

"This is artificial," one of the other leaders asked. "Are you sure it's safe?"

"I happily cook with it every night for Misty," he responded with a smile. "I feed it to my friends and my mother."

"Interesting..."

Despite Gustavo doing most of the talking, it was clear that his fellow gang leaders were listening closely, judging both Jackie's words and how I was reacting. Most eyes were on me, waving Jackie off as not a threat or not having any real power. It wasn't about personal power here, they were worried what a corpo, who had such resources at his disposal, could want with their gang.

Despite their constant eyes on me, the meal was still enjoyable, and it served exactly the purpose Sable and I had wanted, which was to help our guests uncoil themselves and relax. They weren't fully relaxed, of course, but even a little would help me convince them to change their gang into something more productive.

When the food was finished, our robot waiters cleared the table, and small after-dinner drinks were served. A computer was also brought out, which the leaders used to hook up a connection to their boss. I had no idea how hard it was for them to make this meeting happen, but the link was set up, and the computer screen, which was sitting at the end of the table, was suddenly showing the face and upper torso of a middle-aged man of Hispanic descent. I could immediately see the family resemblance to Gustavo, but kept that to myself.

"Campo Orta, my name is Jackson," I said with a smile. "I thank you for agreeing to meet. I can only imagine this must have been a costly effort."

"A few words and greased palms," he admitted with a casual shrug. "And after what you did to Maelstrom and the scavs, as well as all the construction going on all over Night City, how could we refuse?"

"They needed to go," I responded simply.

"Of course,": He agreed with a nod, before looking to my side at Gloria. "It's good to see you, Gloria. I'm glad to see you are doing well. Is Jackson treating you well?"

"It's good to see you as well, Cam, and yes, Jackson is treating David and me very well," The older woman said with a small smile. "I was disappointed to hear you were in prison."

"It was a trade-off," He shrugged, though he refused to elaborate beyond that before focusing back on me. "My apologies, Gloria saved my life quite some time ago. It would be rude to not greet her directly."

"By all means."

I nodded, accepting his apology and sliding past the fact that the important person Gloria had talked about saving was now the gang's leader.

Between her and Jackie, it at least partially explained why they were being so respectful. It was also clear that, while they weren't afraid, they understood just how big a stick I was swinging. The only question is if they respected it enough to take the chance when we gave it to them.

"That actually leads directly into why we wanted this meeting," I admitted, leaning forward a bit. "I hope that everyone agrees that the city is better off without the organized scavs and Maelstrom."

"We didn't have to deal with Maelstrom often in Heywood, but killing scavs has always been, and always will be a public service," Gustavo said, tipping his drink to Jackie, mirroring a statement I knew he liked to say. "No one has ever cleared them out to quite the degree you did, however. All major locations, and from what Padre claims, most of their supply and leadership lines as well. Very impressive, and well done."

"We have a few people working behind the scenes who are rather skilled at data collection," I said, vastly underselling Mary's abilities. "Organizations like Maelstrom and the scavs need to be removed entirely, fruit, plant, and roots, or they just grow back."

At least a few of the leaders recognized where I was likely going with this, but they stayed silent, even I was receiving some hard looks.

"The point is, they were a blight on the city, and they needed to go," I continued. "And with them gone, we are ready to move on to the threats under them."

"The other gangs," Campo said, and I nodded in response. "Including the Valentinos."

"Not necessarily," I said, holding my hands in a placating gesture as some of the leaders and lieutenants opened their mouths to shout at their leader's comments. "My goal is to improve this city. Right now, this city is like a broken, rusted rat trap of a car you find abandoned in some random garage. At one point, it was beautiful, and it could be again with the right effort. But

before you can shine it up and rebuild the engine, though, you gotta wash the rat shit out of it, strip out the rotted wiring, scrape off the rust, and sand off the old paint. Only then can you really start to rebuild it properly."

I let them consider my words for a moment while I took a sip from my drink. It was a small glass of a mixed drink called a [carajillo](#), apparently a popular after-dinner drink made with coffee, mezcal, and coffee liqueur.

"And what part are we?" Gustavo asked, his cousin nodding on the other side of the computer. Both of them were looking at me, as the next response I made was clearly very important.

"Shockingly, you, along with the 6th Street gang, and The Mox would be, if we are sticking to the metaphor, a surprisingly intact engine," I explained, before shaking my head and waving my hand dismissively. "Sorry, perhaps we should move away from that metaphor. What I mean to say is that your purpose, what the Valentinos stand for, things like community, protection, and support against the worst elements of the city? That is something I can appreciate, respect, and would like to encourage."

"But everything else needs to be cut out," Gustavo finished, looking at me with a raised eyebrow. "And how exactly do you suppose we do that?"

"With my help," I explained with a nod. "I have a lot of resources. A *lot* of resources, and I would love to spend them on Heywood and other districts, especially if it means the gangs turn non-violent."

"You would make us defenseless?"

"What? No, of course not. Defending yourself is, as far as I am concerned, a God-given right for all living beings," I assured him, shaking my head. "I'm asking you to remove things like drugs, smuggling, and unprovoked violent crimes against gangs."

"And how exactly do you see that sort of change happening?" one of the leaders asked. "Our people depend on us."

"And I would prefer not to take that away from them," I assured him, looking back at Campo and the rest of the leaders. "Organizing things like neighborhood watches, loans to the people, and community projects would still happen. In fact, I would love it if that became the *focus* of your group. But instead of funding them with bloodied eddies, I would fund them personally."

"Meaning we would be dependent on you." One of the leaders, who had remained silent up to this point.

"At first, maybe," I admitted. "But over time, you would be building your own jobs. For example, Padre. How would you feel about building a few new churches around Heywood? I would provide the funding and the materials, but the community would supply the manpower. Places where people could go and be safe. How about care facilities where the sick and hurt

could receive treatment without owing some hospital corp an arm and a leg? We could fund homes, parks, and shops. And building new things isn't all we can do, either. I would happily fund the repairs and refurbishing of existing *legitimate* businesses, too."

"While the Valentinos have many talented members, most are not what you would call builders," Padre pointed out.

"Then we will teach them," I explained simply. "Or we will find them other jobs. The point is, I see what you are trying to be, and what necessity is making you do. I am offering you a chance to do what you want, without doing what you had to do before."

A few of the leaders shared looks, loaded with meaning I couldn't read. Gustavo seemed to be examining me closely, glancing at Jackie before looking back to me.

"And you plan on making this same offer to 6th street?" he asked. "Give up crime, go legitimate, use my resources to improve yourself and your communities?"

"Yes, I do," I admitted freely. "They would receive the same resources and the same funding, should they agree."

"And what happens when they refuse?" Campo asked. "When they spit on your offer and take advantage of us following you to legitimacy?"

"There are different levels of agreeing to my plan, but if they refuse to play ball at all? I stomp them flat," I explained, keeping my voice level as I stared down the gang leader. "I drop two hundred of my Spartans on their laps with orders to clean the streets of Santo Domingo. I burn their resources, loot their coffers, and kill anyone who raises a gun to *anyone*."

My statement was led by silence, because while I hadn't come out and said it, the threat was clear. I would do the same thing to them if their gang refused to cooperate. I hoped that none of the leaders had any illusions about what that would look like, not after I ruined the scavs in less than five hours and crushed their network in a day.

It was nearly a full minute before anyone spoke. Campo, his eyes narrowed, leaned back in his chair, his eyes locked on mine.

"Why are you doing this?" He asked. "I have never seen a corpo throw away resources like this. I've seen them try to help, thinking it would give them power over us. I've seen them try to kill us, so they could take advantage of the people we protect. But help us, for no reason? There needs to be some reason why."

"I was not born into corporate life. I have no training, no experience," I explained. "In fact, I'm honestly pretty bad with money, as Padre can probably attest to."

The older man, knowing I was referring to just how little he paid for some of my earlier services, had the balls to nod in confirmation. I couldn't help but chuckle, as at this point I was so far beyond him it didn't even matter. After a moment, I turned to refocus on Campo.

"When I see Night City, hell, when I see the world as it is today, I see humanity at the lowest point it has been in a long time," I continued. "If I'm honest, it hurts to see that we have fallen so far. That greed had become the standard, and those willing to ruin their fellow man are so consistently coming out on top."

I paused, running my fingers through my hair. I let out a long breath, shaking my head.

"Honestly, it's a whole lot of words to just say that I see how shit everything is, and I have the power, tech, and the money to change that," I added, taking a sip from my drink. "I want to make this city better, I want to make the *world* better. But the corporations back into their place, reduce their power, help the people they are grinding into early graves, making a quick buck."

"And you're willing to kill to do it," Gustavo stated.

"I don't like it, but my track record speaks for itself," I pointed out.

"And what happens when things start to change, but you fail?" one of the leaders, an older man with a shaved head. "When we start to rely on you and your support disappears."

"Why would it do that?" I asked, raising my eyebrow. "I don't report to anyone, I'm making money hand over fist, I have the materials, the manpower, the combat power. My power base is secure, and my foothold in the city is being secured as we speak. I own almost ten percent of this city, and I'm only showing a *fraction* of what I am capable of."

One of the younger leaders snorted, kissing his teeth as he leaned back heavily in his seat, skepticism rolling off of him in waves. He was the same leader who had been rolling his eyes at me the whole time, staring at me with hostility and poking at my words.

"All you corpos are the same," he stated, voice filled with disgust. "Power and money go to your head, make you think you're unbeatable. You have some scary soldiers, but we've been fighting corpos for decades, we know how to keep you out of Heywood. We won't roll over and die like the scavs."

While he clearly believed what he was saying, the looks he was getting from his fellows told me they didn't necessarily agree. He seemed oblivious to the looks, however.

I looked at him for a long moment, wondering just how I should react to his statement. While no one looked like they agreed with him, I could see that his words had still hurt my argument. Which meant I couldn't just move past it, I needed to address it directly.

"If you're so confident you could take one of my Spartans down, feel free to try," I said, gesturing to one of the Spartans that had been standing guard in the corner. "Though the way you talk, you might enjoy an extra challenge."

I snapped my fingers and, in one of the corners of the large, open room, a Spartan unit, wearing our custom-made stealth suit, faded into view. Technically, the suit was inferior to their normal level two MJOLNIR, only functioning as a tier one, but having a stealth squad up and ready to go, armed with stealth-based equipment, was worth the slight sacrifice in other abilities.

His eyes went wide as one of the invisible Spartans revealed themselves, as did the rest of the group. They looked around quickly, wondering just how many of them were in the room with us. Technically, there weren't any more, as the invisible units were stashed around the kitchen to keep out of the way, and I had called this unit in specifically to make a point.

"Look. I know that everything I am saying goes against your instincts," I admitted. "I know you don't want to make less money. I know your people won't see putting down their guns and picking up a welder or a hammer as an upgrade. But I am giving you the opportunity to change, to be better, to stop relying on crime and actually *help*, rather than being just another necessary evil. I don't want to fight you, I want to work with you."

"You've given us a lot to think about," Campo responded after the long pause. "I don't think you could expect us to agree right this moment, without giving us time to discuss your offer."

"Of course," I responded with a nod. "When you're ready to talk, come to Rock Ridge, and we can discuss how things will change there."

Campo nodded, and we started to close the meeting. I went through the motions, but I had already mostly given up. If they weren't convinced they needed to agree already, it was very unlikely that time away would suddenly change their mind. If anything, giving them time to delude themselves would only make things worse. But forcing them to make a decision would only spiral the conversation, most likely making their choice inevitable.

At least letting them go gave us a chance.

By the time we were shaking hands, I was ready to be home. While I couldn't read everyone, it was clear that most of the group, while they understood I was a huge powerhouse, someone new to the scene that could make a lot of trouble for them, they were far from convinced they should hand over everything they worked hard for, and all the power they had managed to grab for themselves. While most weren't deluded enough to think they could win, it appeared that many of them were prepared to die on their hill, rather than give up what they considered theirs.

When we piled into the VTOL that was taking us home, I let out a long, distracted sigh. Kaytlyn, who was sitting across from me, just shook her head.

"I told you they weren't going to listen," she pointed out. "They don't care who or what you are. All the shit about protecting their community might mean something to their underlings. But to those guys? It's all about power. Just corpos wearing a different mask."

"Yeah, but I had to try," I pointed out. "I needed to at least make the attempt to stop it before it starts."

"Are you going to release the record of the meeting?" Sable asked.



"Yes, it's going to be included," I confirmed. "The full meeting, start to finish. But first, we need to meet with 6th Street. I'm... less concerned about The Mox, I think I have a solution to that issue."

Most of the crew, especially Rebecca, gave me a curious look at my last statement, but I brushed that off. Instead, I just kept talking.

"Once we meet with 6th Street, we give them both a few days, then release the news. We give the people an ultimatum, basically don't go into work, 'cause work isn't going to be there much longer, and then make our move. Both at the same time, start at the top and work our way down."

Despite the ease with which I spoke the words, they sat heavily in my heart. The scavs and Maelstrom had deserved to be swept rather brutally from the face of Night City. And Tyger Claws were closer to them than not, though we would likely be discussing more lenient terms of surrender for them. 6th Street and the Valentinos, there would be a lot of people fighting on their side, and not all of them, maybe not even most of them, deserved it.

"We crush the Tyger claws the day after tomorrow," I added, shaking my head. "Maybe they will get the very realness of the scenario then."

"We won't be able to do nearly as much land buying," Sable pointed out with a frown. "People are fully aware of our strategy now, they expect it and are selling for more, or holding on to their land for a better deal."

"Then make a better deal," I responded with a shrug. "We stole eight hundred million eddies from Arasaka for trying to use you as leverage. It's poetic that we use it to loosen their control of the city. Unless you think we need it?"

"...No, we can more than afford it," she admitted. "Even if it goes against my instincts to pay full price."

Not long after we took off, we teleported out, stepping out into the massive production cavern. Within twenty minutes, we were back in the courtyard. For understandable reasons, people weren't exactly up for talking, as while the results had been expected, it left everyone feeling somber.

Just five hours later, I had a moment of Deja Vu, as Mary once again woke Sable and I up as we were sleeping.

"Sorry to wake you, Jay. But someone is approaching the perimeter," She explained. "This time by car, making no attempts to disguise themselves. It's Gustavo Orta."

"What?" I asked, rolling out of bed, any tiredness I felt fading quickly. "Just him?"

"All scans say he is alone," She confirmed. "Going relatively slow. He will be here in two minutes."



"Wake up Jackie, Gloria, and Riggs," I said, shaking my head. "Sable and I will be up shortly. May as well see what he wants."

By the time he reached the front gate of our wall, we were all waiting for him, the obligatory Spartans there as well. He slowed to a stop just outside our gate, climbing out of his surprisingly normal-looking car. Considering most of the cars they had shown up to the meeting in had been gold with various standout bits of art decals on, the [Archer](#) he climbed out of was downright pedestrian.

He stepped forward, stopping at the foot of the gate.

"You have somewhere private we can talk?" He asked, looking between Jackie, Gloria, and I.

After a long moment I studied his face, silently waiting for Murtaugh's latest deep scan to finish. When it came up clean of everything but his pistol, which he carried openly at his side, I nodded.

"Sure."

He followed behind the group silently as we made our way to the meeting hall. We didn't make it past the open first floor before we claimed a general seating area. I gestured for him to sit before we sat as well.

"What can I do for you, Gustavo?"

"...Your company deals in medical tech, correct?" he asked, focusing on me.

"It is one of our specialties, yes," I admitted, slightly caught off guard by where he had gone after my prompt. "Why?"

"Hypothetically speaking, 'cause I'm sure you wouldn't answer me in any other way," he said, leaning in, his elbows on his knees. "How much more advanced is the tech you're working on than what you've released?"

"...What exactly are you fishing for, Gustavo?" Sable asked from beside me. "As you can imagine, most of our clients looking for information on our products don't visit at two in the morning."

The gang leader seemed to be mentally chewing on his options after Sable spoke up, and after a moment, he muttered under his breath.

"Dammit, not like I have any more options," He said, shaking his head. "My girlfriend, she... her father is a senior member of 6th Street. A few weeks ago, her father tried to take me out, not realizing that she was with me at the time. She took a stray to the head and has been in a coma ever since."

After he was finished with his story, Gloria stood and sat beside him, her hand rubbing his back.

"Jesus, Gus," Jackie said. "How has there not been a war in the streets?"

"Her dad is keeping it contained," He explained. "He blames me for it... I'm pretty sure he has already put a hit out on me. Padre has tried to suggest I leave town a few times, go on "a vacation", even though that is pushing his neutrality more than he usually would."

"And you're hoping that I might have a solution?" I asked. "Some sort of secret development in R&D that will help her?"

"Yes," He admitted without flinching. "If you can help her recover. I don't care if she remembers me, if her dad keeps her away from me forever, if she wakes up and says she never wants to see me again..."

He trailed off, reaching into his coat pocket and pulling out an easily recognizable ring case. He stared at it for a long moment before looking back at me.

"If you have something that can help her, I will convince my brother and a few others that listening to you is the best way to preserve our dignity and way of life," He offered. "I'll even get Alfredo, the dumbass who called out your Spartans, bumped off the table. He has been skimming way too much off our outreach programs."

"... How bad were her injuries?"

Gustavo reached into another pocket and pulled out a faded and folded flimsi printout. He passed it to the Spartan standing behind him, who walked it over to me. After taking a peek, I found a scan of his girlfriend's head. After examining it for a moment, I looked up at Gustavo.

"You realize, if she wakes up, there is no guarantee she will ever be the same," I pointed out. "This damage is... It's going to affect her mind, potentially her memories. She will likely have to relearn quite a few things..."

"I don't care," He responded easily. "As long as she isn't in perpetual torment... Martha is strong. She won't give up just because it takes her some time to recover."

I took another look at the scan before standing and holding out my hand.

"You have yourself a deal, Gustavo," I said, the man quickly standing and shaking my hand. "Give me some time to get my people on the job, but I'm confident we can do something about this."

"Okay then... I'll head back and-"

"No point," I said, shaking my head as I cut him off. "You'll find that my people work a bit faster than you're used to, Gus. Give me an hour, and I'll give you something to fix her."