

The week following the press conference was busy, but not precisely in the most exciting way. The morning following my talk with Jackie and David, I tested out my mass assembly system. I started by picking a few minor, mostly inconsequential items from the tech tree to blueprint and then assemble, testing various variables in the process. I wanted to make sure I understood the entire process properly before I was caught in a bad scenario because I thought I knew how it worked, but had missed some sort of key point.

Basically, I learned that as long as I maintained majority control over the process, the mass assembly machine counted as "me" for the purposes of the Tinker of Fiction. This was fantastic news, as it meant a massive leap in assembly speed and size was possible.

It also meant, however, that I could not simply pass off the small, repetitive tasks, such as securing screws or bolts after the first ones were set in place, or threading wires into specific spaces. The basic response program that I built into the assembler was quite capable of following blueprints and plans, but relying on it for those functions compromised my connection to the ToF for that item.

I could, however, rely on the system to perform tasks such as stabilizing my control, scaling down strength and speed ratios automatically, adjusting control schemes, and basically anything else that wasn't directly related to assembly. Essentially, while I was using the mass assembler, the controlling computer system could watch over my shoulder, much like a nurse, monitoring equipment, handing me tools, warning me about time, and everything in between.

While the system was clumsy at first, and what I was making took longer than it would have to do by hand, I could see that, just like the custom CAD system I used, the ceiling for improvement was much higher than my manual work. I could tell that as I got more competent with the process, assembling things would go as fast as the assembler could be fed parts.

When I was satisfied with the testing, I handed the project to Samwise, so he could streamline it for both mass production purposes. He would also start planning the massive, room-sized version that was the actual goal for the whole project. He assured me it would be ready before the next tech tree so that I could have some time to practice with it. I would also set aside some time to practice with the smaller one when I wasn't busy.

Speaking of busy, Frank had clearly been putting in the time, as the living quarters courtyard was finally showing signs of life. Large swaths of grass were beginning to grow, shooting up rapidly enough that it was clearly a result of some modification. Meanwhile, small shoots and sprouts were breaching through the dirt around flower beds. Already, I could see what Noah had been going for, the grass alone being more than enough to get his vision across. I was excited to see what the small green plants would turn into.

Under the ground was not the only place that changed, either. Noah and his team had made significant progress on our meet-and-greet building, a seven-story building with a lounge on the first floor, a presentation hall, minor meeting rooms, a cafeteria, a reading room, and a large, open meeting hall on the top floor. He was still working on the interior, but the [structure was impressive](#), and reminded me of modern buildings from my own time. The crafty AI even

revealed that the top floor could slowly rotate, showing off the surrounding area. At the moment, there wasn't much of a point, since the view wasn't anything special, but once we started converting the area into a more livable space, that would change.

With the meeting hall just a day or so away from completion, Noah had already started tearing down the shack, since no one was using it. In its place, he had plans to build a proper security building for Murtaugh, a hardened structure where the AI could run our future operations out of, as well as the Ridge's security. Noah was also in the very early stages of building a proper teleport hub, a building that would be disguised as an apartment building, constructed behind the central area, where several trailer homes had previously been located.

We had plenty of space and resources, after all, so we might as well keep building.

The Night City projects were also making fast progress. Both main sites, the warehouse district and the docks, had been completely demolished, and the warehouse district had been cleaned, leveled, and prepared for further construction, mostly awaiting the final designs to begin digging foundations.

The docks, on the other hand, were a different story. When all of the buildings and materials had been cleared and demolished, Noah started in on the water. A thick, temporary concrete block wall was being slowly assembled in the ocean so that we could pump out and drain the water surrounding the docks. Once the water was drained, we would completely tear out the dock, every last chunk, all the way to the "shore." This was only the start of what was a much larger project, one I was very excited to see the results of.

As time passed and work progressed on Rocky Ridge, my own projects, and in Night City, the Jurassic Park tech tree finally came to an end, leaving me with my usual break week. Unfortunately, however, it was once again not a week, but eight days. I still had no inkling as to why that was happening, or if the amount of time would continue to increase, but for two trees in a row, I had an extra day added to my break.

Hopefully, I would know more soon, as honestly, that was the part that was killing me. If I knew more, I could start to plan around it, or at least understand what my future was going to look like. Instead, I was entirely in the dark, without a hint as to the rhyme or reason for the change.

It was early on the third day of my eight-day break that I woke up and headed out of the Vault, teleporting to the garage and stepping out into a sunny day. After a quick check of the time, I turned and headed towards the campground. Alexander had asked to see me, and I figured what better time to make that happen than over some breakfast from the test kitchen. Jackie was having a blast maintaining, experimenting, and working at the small restaurant. Just watching him work, you could feel his excitement and eagerness to apply what he was learning to the real thing.

I picked up my food order from the kitchen, grabbing both Alexander's and my own food as well as a pair of drinks, before carrying it through the campground. I spotted Panam and one of her friends working on her truck, the woman waving back as I gave her a half-hearted salute.

From there, I walked past some of the large trucks, then along the wall, before climbing up the corner tower. Several pairs of shades stepped out of the way silently as I approached, prompting me to nod instinctively, even if they had nothing in the way of a consciousness.

Alexander was sitting at a table that the Nomads put up on top of the squat corner tower, looking out over the badlands. We were facing away from Night City, so the Nomad leader was looking out at the wind farm and beyond, a radio playing quietly on the table. As he heard me approach, he stood to shake my hand.

"Hey, Alexander, how's it going?" I asked, sitting on the other side of the small table. "You guys have been pretty quiet over here. I hope you guys weren't too spooked by the press conference."

He slapped the radio off as I put our food on the table, tearing the bag open so I could distribute the food. We both got breakfast burritos, mine cheesy and his spicy, as well as some fruit salads kept cold with an insulating wrap.

"I won't lie, some of our more... sensitive members didn't like the look," he admitted, accepting his food. "You play a convincing corpo."

"Yeah, you can blame that on Sable," I said with a shiver. "I don't like it, it makes me feel like my ego is bloated."

"Then why do it at all?"

"Because... well, I'm a philanthropist at heart, but they don't really exist anymore," I explained, shaking my head. "If I were honest and admitted that, people would always be looking for my angle, wondering what I was trying to pull. By playing an eccentric corpo, when I charge cheap, affordable rent, everyone just assumes I'm trying to run some new money-making scheme and moves on. If I tried to do that under the guise of helping people, everyone would start looking for the catch."

"Better the devil you know than the devil you don't," Alexander responded, and I wince, making a so-so gesture with my hand.

"I would prefer not to be a devil at all, but yeah, basically."

He nodded, and for a few minutes we just enjoyed our food. I remembered that I had also grabbed drinks, handing him a [glass bottle that reminded me](#) of the ones from my old home. Jackie and Frank had finished experimenting with their juice concoctions and could now produce crates of them at a time.

They were already talking to Sable about starting a new branch of Tinker Tech focused on food, and there was absolutely no way it would not completely eclipse the tech branch. The juice alone was going to change the market on a fundamental level.

Eventually, after finishing about half of my breakfast, I spoke up, giving Alexander a raised eyebrow.

"So, I don't mind the view or the company, but it sounded like you had something specific you wanted to talk about," I said, gesturing for him to speak.

"Yeah, there is," he admitted, putting his burrito down for the moment. "Dakota and I talked, as did a few of the other family leaders, and we decided that we are going to stick around for a while."

"I'm glad to hear that."

"Dakota is adamant that being your friend is just about the best bet we could make, and while the others might not share her open optimism, they won't deny the kindness you and your people have shown us," he continued, meeting my eyes easily. "Parts, fair work, good food, security, are all fantastic, but the respect and dignity? That's something worth more than gold, especially to us Nomads."

"Hey, I'm just happy to have some good neighbors," I said with a smile, though I nodded to show I accepted his words. "And I'm glad to hear you're sticking around."

"The topic of discussing a few things did come up," He admitted with a frown. "We are concerned that with so much attention on the Ridge, we might be in danger. More than was first anticipated, at least."

"I won't lie, it's possible," I admitted with a wince. "Our security perimeter is pretty wide at this point, and pretty sensitive. However, we could definitely up the security a bit. Perhaps add more shades to the wall and have a few heavies tucked into the corners to provide additional support. How do you feel about being loaned a few sets of power armor for patrols?"

"Do you mean the power armor you gave us or...?"

"No, the ones we use," I explained, tapping the table as I considered the problem. "As long as you don't try to disassemble or scan them, or take them out of the campground, we could give you maybe a dozen to patrol the walls with. And the properly sized weapons as well. Actually, how about two dozen, and you patrol the whole perimeter? I trust my security to keep watch, but having some organic eyes out there could only help."

Alexander's eyes went wide at my offer, shocked that I had offered that so easily. I had to hold back a chuckle. Considering the type of trackers we had on the suits, there was virtually no chance they could be removed from our presence. Plus, the Nomads were sticking by us, which in my book was absolutely something I wanted to encourage to the best of my ability.

"We could also see about setting up a safe house for those of you who aren't fighters. Especially the children and such," I explained. "A nice reinforced bunker they could hide in in case the worst happens."

"That...all of that would be greatly appreciated," he admitted, still wide-eyed and surprised. "That's.... well, that is a lot more than we anticipated, honestly."

"We take care of our friends, Alexander," I responded with a smile, popping a piece of strawberry into my mouth. "And besides, reinforcing the walls can only make us all more secure."

"Then, in that case, we accept, happily," He said with a nod, reaching over to shake my hand.

"Pleasure doing business with you," I said with a smirk, leaning back in my chair after shaking his hand. "Was that it? Issues with security?"

"It was the only thing we were really worried about," He answered, though the look on his face made it clear that wasn't completely all. "That said, I do have a request."

"Shoot," I said, finishing off my fruit salad and leaning back with my drink.

"I have a lot of people depending on me. Too many for me to be playing around with chances," He explained, turning back to look over the camp for a long moment. "This group is significantly larger than the group I watched over before. I can handle it, I'm confident enough in my abilities to say that. However, I can't just trust my gut for everything. It's telling me I can trust you, but..."

"I get it," I assured him with a nod. "What do you need?"

"I would like a peek below the surface," He responded. "You guys have played a few cards, flashed a few to show off, but we can tell you've kept a lot close to your chest. It doesn't have to be all, but I would like to see some of what's going on behind closed doors."

I studied the slightly older man, the leader of this particular group of Nomads. I knew next to nothing about him, as he was from somewhere that never came close to touching the game. That said, just as his gut told him he could trust me, my gut was saying that I could trust him. I let out a long breath and nodded, before glancing back at the campground as well. By this point, I had realized that Panam's work on her truck had been a ruse, as standing on the back of it gave her a clear view of us. As I peeked back, I spotted her keeping an eye on us.

I turned around completely, and before she could pretend to be busy, I gestured for her to join us. I could practically feel Alexander wince for being caught out, not that I actually cared. It wasn't like she had a gun pointed at me or anything, since Murtaigh would have reacted harshly if she did. As she climbed down from her truck, I turned back to her boss.

"I'm willing to show you some of what is going on," I said with a nod. "But you need to understand, some of what is hidden is for *other* people's protection. Sometimes the less you know, the better."

"I'm aware, but I can take care of myself."

I nodded, about to respond when Panam finally arrived, taking the stairs two at a time. She made her way to the table and stopped, looking at both of us before focusing on Alexander.

"What's up, boss?" She asked.

"Alexander asked to see behind the curtain," I explained, Panam looking back to me. "I agreed, but I thought I'd make the offer to his second in command as well. As long as you know the risks and your boss says it's okay..."

"It's up to her," Alexander said, giving his second in command a nod. "She knows the risks."

"I'm in," she said, almost before he was finished, causing him to roll his eyes, but she just cocked her hip and scoffed at his reaction. "What? You think I'd pass up the chance to see what's in that garage? No chance in hell."

"The garage is actually empty," I cut in, smirking when they both looked at me in surprise. "C'mon, it's been a while since I took anyone down the rabbit hole."

I stood up from the chair and ordered one of the nearby shades to take care of our trash, before walking down off the wall. As we walked, I silently messaged Samwise and asked him to set up some things for us. He didn't need to do it personally, just have some MRVNs move things around. As we crossed out of the campground, I turned to face my guests as I walked backwards.

"So... just how deep are you looking to go?" I asked. "Just below the surface? Maybe a good dive? Or are you looking to walk along the bottom?"

The two Nomads shared a look, the latter giving her boss a shrug. Alexander looked back at me, a determined look on his face.

"If you're willing... let's take a walk."

"Alright, sounds like a plan," I said with a chuckle, as I turned around, leading them to the garage. "Let's just hope it's not too enthusiastic for you."

"I thought you said the garage is empty?" Panam asked as we approached my old workshop.

"It is, we aren't going to the garage," I explained, leading them through the side building and then down to the basement. "Welcome to the Rocky Ridge teleport hub. It's probably going to be moved pretty soon, but for now, this is where we disappear to, which I'm sure you guys have noticed by now."

As always, getting the two used to the idea of teleportation took a few minutes, as well as me and a MRVN teleporting back and forth a few times. After that, I finally managed to get them to step on the platform, all three of us eventually arriving at the vault. As we stepped out of the arrival room and into the quarters, both of the Nomads gasped.

"Are we... underground?" Alexander asked, squatting down to run his hand gently over the grass. "This is real grass, isn't it? Incredible..."

"It is, a special kind made by Frank, our bio specialist," I confirmed with a smile. "This is the courtyard, the hub area of our living quarters. We've been living here for the last few weeks."

"With the teleport... I get the feeling this isn't under the Ridge," Panam asked, looking up at the artificial sky.

"Not even close," I responded with a smirk. "This is the vault, a deep underground bunker designed to be one hundred percent self-sufficient, a safe place for us to retreat to in case the corporations go crazy again."

"I assume your workshop is behind one of those doors?" Alexander asked as he stood, looking around.

"Oh no, this is just our group's personal quarters," I corrected. "Samwise and Noah went a little crazy with this project. The vault can comfortably and sustainably accommodate up to eight thousand people. We have a mall, an entertainment district, bars, a go-kart track, and just about everything in between."

"W..what?" Alexander asked, his eyes wide as he turned slowly to look at me. "Are... are you serious?"

"I know, it's hard to imagine, but it's true. I've toured some of it," I assured him. "It's all empty, but it's all real. They are even in the early stages of making a second one, even further from Night City."

"Why? What's the point?" Panam asked, confused. "Why build an empty bunker? Why waste the resources?"

"Just in case everything goes wrong," I explained, scratching the stubble on my chin. "As for resources... I'm not really spending any. I may or may not have discovered technological transmutation."

For the next few hours, I led the two through some of my greatest technological secrets. I showed off some of the vault, including the bowling alley. We then visited my workshop, where I showed off the molly makers at work, a proto-matter generator, and some of our advanced weapons. I gave them each the same stimpak holster that the rest of the crew received, making them promise to use it only for life-and-death emergencies.

Our final stop was one of the newly completed observation stations built into one of the massive pillar supports of [the major production](#) facility. It really didn't serve much of a purpose, since the whole place was automatic in a way that would boggle a human mind, but it was one hell of a view.

When we were finally done, I brought the pair back up to the courtyard, where they both dropped down on a bench. They both had a distant stare, wide-eyed and looking almost harrowed by their experience. Panam reached into one of her pockets and pulled out a pack of cigarettes, handing one to Alexander before lighting them both. I considered telling them that

there was no smoking in the vault, but the filters could more than handle it, and I didn't have the heart to take their last bastion of stability.

Eventually, when their cigarettes were down to their filters, they had recovered enough to talk.

"You know that was insane," Alexander said, staring at me. "Every last bit of it. Every fucking bit of it."

"According to Sable, you get used to it," I said with a shrug. "Sorry that it's so much to process, but I figure it's better to get it over and done with, all at once. Tear the bandage off, you know?"

"That wasn't a bandage, Jackson," Panam said, jabbing her cigarette at me. "You just tore off stitches! A whole damn cast!"

"I know, I know. But think about it this way. Now that you guys are in the know, you can start working closer with us," I explained. "For example..."

I pull out one of the older watches I designed to make sure I could teleport my people out of danger. It was a slightly updated version, one that didn't require an implant but could still perform a similar level of personal health monitoring. It was still a teleport beacon, as well as an unblockable communications device.

My people had moved to a fully implanted device for our teleport beacon, but this was a solid alternative for people I wanted to protect, but who might not agree to an implant.

"These are teleport beacons. They are also several other things, including an unblockable unlimited communication device and a health monitor, but the primary purpose is a beacon," I explained, tapping the watch screen. "The Ridge has excellent defenses and security, some of them not immediately apparent. However, on the off chance that Araska or another company goes completely off the rails and tries to blow us all to hell, we could get you and anyone wearing them out of the Ridge and into the bunker in seconds. My people use a different implant, and wear their watches for their communication capability."

I handed Alexander the watch, the slowly recovering Nomad accepting it, turning it over in his hands.

"That... okay, I can see these being useful as a final line of protection," Alexander admitted. "What about the implants you use?"

"You're more than welcome to get one of those, but would you be able to convince everyone to get one?" I asked, raising an eyebrow, as the leader frowned and shook his head. "Exactly. A lot easier to convince someone to use a tracker they could throw away if they wanted to."

Alexander nodded, and after a moment, put the watch down on the bench beside him. We continued to discuss some of the other things we could distribute among the group,

although, honestly, there wasn't much beyond what they already knew. While I trusted both of them, I had no way of vetting their whole "family," especially since Alexander had already admitted there were some people who didn't quite trust me. I couldn't just hand out stimpaks, for example, without risking someone selling or misusing them.

After a few minutes, it was clear that both of them were still recovering, but the more we talked, the more Alexander was getting his feet back under him. Eventually, he was apparently ready to ask the question he had obviously been holding back.

"What's the point? Of all this?" he asked, leaning back slightly and looking up at the fake sky. "Money is clearly not your goal, or you'd be releasing more of what you've made. Safety isn't either, or you would have disappeared after your vault was done. Not to mention that buying a chunk of Watson doesn't make you safer. So what's your real angle?"

"I wasn't completely lying when I gave that press conference," I admitted, rubbing my hands together before pushing one of them through my hair. "The major difference is that I'm not just looking at Night City, I'm looking at the world."

"The world?" Panam asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Humanity has been spinning around the drain for so long, we've given up all hope of ever pulling out of the spiral," I responded, letting out a long sigh of disappointment. "To everyone, the constant death, stealing, greed, betrayal, and desolation have just become normal. And yet, if we could just stop spinning, we could be so much more. At the risk of sounding arrogant, I believe I can help pull us out of that spiral."

"How?" Panam asked, the disbelief in her voice clear. "The world is still burning from the last corporate war, and they are already gearing up for another. Even with all this stuff, how could you stop that?"

"I already have all the ingredients for a low-level, post-scarcity society," I pointed out. "The only thing keeping me from trying to share that with the world is the fact that the corporations would never willingly give up their control, even if it meant destroying the opportunity for humanity to grow to the next stage."

"You're going to fight the corporations?" Alexander asked. "That's the only way to stop them from fucking everything up."

"Alexander, I'm going to fight fucking *everyone*," I responded with a hard line tone. "Corporations, governments, regimes and religions, even society and culture. I'm going to pull humanity into a more stable state of mind, a more stable society, so that one day I can release everything I have and not worry about people burning cities to the ground in an attempt to control it all. I'm going to drag humanity into a utopia, kicking and screaming if necessary."

My declaration caught both of the Nomads off guard, my intensity and certainty a level above what they had expected. Still, even as they were surprised, it was clear that they had heard my statement and, on some level, agreed with it. Panam was openly nodding along, while

Alexander had a more contemplative look on his face. This wasn't actually much of a shock. Nomad families as a whole were comprised of people who had already refused to conform to the world's direction, sometimes even violently. Such a counterculture, line-in-the-sand ultimatum wasn't much different from the words of their peers, or maybe even their own thoughts.

"It won't be easy, or bloodless, but with the right tech, people, and message, I believe we can genuinely make this world a better place to live," I continued. "I believe we can convince the world there is more to life than some cheap thrills, a flash of fame, and a drink named after you at some over hyped theme bar. More to life than selling your body, life, and soul to a corporation that sees you as little more than fodder for its machine."