

Despite our rapid response to the incoming attack, the aircraft's speed and momentum, even after they were destroyed, carried a good chunk of their debris to Rocky Ridge. Nothing ultimately made it past our walls, though our laser turrets were forced to blast a few faster-moving chunks to keep that from happening.

"Mary, have Murtaugh dispatch a team of Spartans to secure and scan the debris," I ordered, looking out at the smoking wrecks. "Make sure there aren't any active systems and disarm any explosives."

"Of course," she said, still just connected through my head, so to Sable and Drake it looked like I was talking to myself. "I am already backtracking through the air force base that directed these aircraft. They are Militech back at NUSA bases..."

"I need confirmation if it was Militech, NUSA, or both," I emphasized.

"You'll have it," Mary assured me. "I'll report back in a few minutes."

I nodded, even if she couldn't see me, before turning to Sable.

"Send a message to the citizens, assure them that they were never in any real danger, and that everyone on the base will receive an extra twenty-four hours of hazard pay," I said, frowning before adding a bit more. "That includes the people who don't actually work here, but live with people who do."

"Good plan," she said with a nod, pulling out her small tablet and tapping on it. "I'll get the statement out and get the ball rolling on the payments."

Deputy Commissioner Drake, who had been following along as best she could, focused on me when Sable focused on her typing.

"After what you described doing to Arasaka for attacking just one of your people, I'm almost afraid to ask... What are you going to do now?"

"I don't know," I admitted, my fists clenched as I worked my jaw. "But... last time I almost blew up and did something that would likely cause quite a few more problems, so I'm doing my best to control myself."

"Jackie, Kaytlyn, and the others are already on their way to the meeting hall," Mary warned. "I... told them you are holding yourself back much better this time."

"Just barely."

Within five minutes, we were all standing in the same spot in the meeting hall, looking through the window out over the smoking wrecks, watching Spartans poke and prod at them. By then, Sable had finished her statement, and Mary had some news for us, appearing on a projector this time so she could communicate with everyone.

"Militech isn't attempting to hide any of this," she said. "The military base is completely controlled by Militech in all but name. This was an attempt to destabilize us. They had a spotter waiting to see you on the surface. When they saw you come to the meeting hall, they sent the Thunderhawks out to blow it up and kill you."

"They were targeting me specifically?" I asked, tilting my head. "I thought they all were assuming I was just a figurehead? That I had some sort of backer pulling the strings?"

"They do. Militech's current theory is that a group of businesses has come together and secretly merged in order to stand up to their power level," she explained. "They think taking control of Night City is a move to stabilize a new power base for the resulting new megacorp."

"Huh... I mean, given what they know... waving away all the crazy tech, that is as good a theory as any," I admitted with a frown. "What did they think killing me would do?"

"If you were just a figurehead, killing you would still destabilize the move to take over Night City," Sable explained. "This imaginary group would have to either give up or select a new puppet, which would take time and potentially reveal you aren't just a crazy rich guy looking to make Night City a better place."

I took a minute to digest their explanations, wondering where they thought all my incredible tech was coming from, before eventually shaking my head free of that train of thought. What Militech thought was happening didn't matter right now, punishing them for trying to hurt us did.

"My first instinct is to just send a rain of Spartans on all the Militech facilities here," I admitted. "Kill anyone who fights back, and drop the rest outside the city limits. Before we were going to ask them to leave, let them pull out over time, but I'm not feeling that generous anymore."

"They would certainly retaliate for that, wouldn't they?" Jackie asked with a frown. "I know we can likely handle that, but the whole point was to finish hardening Night City before we took that step, right?"

"It was. But we cannot let this go unpunished, and we were going to make moves against the branch here anyway," Sable pointed out. "May as well do it now."

"Even if you do nothing, this will not be the end," Drake, who had mostly been silent since we had all gathered. "They will not stop until you make it too costly to continue. They see you as a threat, and given how extreme they were willing to go for their first strike, the second would likely be a lot worse."

"They feel the pressure mounting, they will not hold back unless we show this was not something we will allow," Sable continued, nodding in agreement with Drake. "With the major gangs done, we could sweep up the rest pretty quickly, especially with Mary as overwatch for the Voodoo Boys. Militech knew they were next."

"Which makes removing their assets in Night City the perfect punishment," Kaytlyn pointed out. "Assuming we can keep them from escalating."

The conversation hit a lull, and I let the silence continue as I considered our options. After a moment, I looked up to Sable with a curious look.

"...When Arasaka targeted you, Sable, Kaytlyn convinced me not to threaten Sarubo directly because he wasn't the kind of person to bow to that kind of pressure," I said with a considering frown. "What kind of person is Militech's CEO?"

"[Lucas Hardford](#)?" Sable confirmed. "He is... a decent leader, runs the company well, uses the persona of a kind, giving man to rally support. He does not have the spine that Rosalind Myers has."

"Does she control Militech from the shadows, while running NUSA?" I asked, raising an eyebrow.

"She certainly had influence, but no, Lucas is not a puppet. He may not have the spine of steel, but he is still a corpo."

"In that case, have an idea," I said with a nod. "We disassemble Militech from Night City. I want the people gone, their buildings under our control, and their equipment locked down. I want their entire influence gone from the city. But, to keep Lucas from retaliating, we show him just a glimpse of what we are capable of, not just to him, but to the entirety of Militech. I don't want there to be a single doubt in anyone's head that if we wanted to wipe them from the map, we could. That should keep them occupied until we are ready to engage them directly."

"So we do what you wanted to do to Arasaka," Kaytlyn clarified. "Well, at least this time it has a chance of working."

"What sort of message are you looking to send?" Jackie asked. "Going to rough him up or something?"

"No, though he deserves it. I want to show him that no matter where he is, no matter what he is doing, that he can never hide from us."

"And how are you going to do that?" Kaytlyn asked, raising her eyebrow.

"Well... he seems to have lost some rather valuable bits of scrap on our land," I said, gesturing to the smoking wreck outside the city. "It's only neighborly that we return it, right?"

I outlined my idea, something that echoed what we did to Arasaka, but was unique in its own way. This needed to hit hard, not only because it was a punishment for a direct attack against Rocky Ridge, but also because it was not some dumb division manager getting in over his head. Mary had proof that the CEO himself knew of and approved this plan, thinking it would leave our backers listless and lost, buying them time to cut down the rest of what they saw as a weed that had been left alone for too long, growing out of sight.

That was unacceptable.

Within an hour, our Spartans were ready. Our first move was to nearly triple our forces around the city openly, acting as if we were turtling up and defending the land we had gained, both through our purchases and by allying with certain groups. In a show of force, there were Spartans on every street, warthogs on every road, and drones openly flying around. Compared to what we had shown previously, the several hundred Spartans that we dispatched would have seemed to come from nowhere.

Then, after pretending to turtle for an hour, without warning, we dropped nearly the same amount on Militech facilities around the city. A direct attack that hit everywhere at once, every single location we could find, even those that were just affiliates.

We had to pull from the growing force on Avalon to do it, but two after the attack, Murtaugh and Mary orchestrated an assault that *dwarfed* our previous raids. Just the raid on [Militech Offices](#) in the corporate center was double what we used to crush 6th Street.

All across the city, Spartans moved, clearing buildings, cleanly killing anyone who raised a weapon against them, and disabling anyone who surrendered. If they attacked us, and we came down on them like an inevitable rain of death. If not, they were stunned and dragged away.

Within four hours, we had stomped out every facility we could find and gathered every single person who surrendered. Most of that time was spent watching groups of stealth Spartans hunt down people who had escaped the initial purge or had simply not been around for it.

Unfortunately, as predicted, the fight between corporation-funded PMCs and company assets was not as one-sided or clean as the fight against the various gangs had been. Sure, we still steamrolled them completely, as each Spartan was easily the equivalent of a well-built borg, with no risk of going rogue from psychosis or any other issues, but that wasn't enough. Militech was too well armed and set in for things to be easy.

For the first time, one of our fights had civilian casualties, despite the best efforts of all of us. Most of those losses, both deaths and injuries, were brought on due to the simple fact that while a gang's idea of heavy weapons was usually grenades, maybe the occasional shoulder-fired rocket, Militech was more than happy to bring *their* definition of heavy weapons out while civilians were still around. Soldiers armed with high explosive ordinances, hidden heavy vehicles armed with high caliber weapons, [dozens of Centaurs](#) stationed around high value targets, [Minotaurs](#) deployed from hidden garages, and even a handful of [power armor teams](#), coming [in a few](#) different [varieties](#), all flooded the targets and streets surrounding them.

Thankfully, since Murtaugh and Mary both foresaw the heavy armaments, our Spartans had the tools to take them down. Most of those fell pretty quickly to the rapidly coordinated assaults of our Spartans, between our Mag cannon mounted on warthogs, vastly upgraded Spartan Lasers, and even air support from a few stealth drones.

Unfortunately, while they could handle the armor, there was still a lot of heat being thrown around, and by the time the city was calming down, we had around three hundred casualties, with fifty-three deaths in total. We would have had more, but I specifically pushed the use of stimpaks whenever we could to bring lethal injuries to more easily treatable levels.

I hated that it was necessary, but we needed to expunge Militech before they started using their assets in Night City to create issues. As horrible as it was, the civilian deaths that happened now were better than the hundreds, or even more, that might occur later if we didn't slap the megacorp down now.

Of course, we still needed to convince Militech, specifically its CEO, that messing with us was a bad idea and that they couldn't compete with what we would do to them if they tried again. So, we took the wreckage from all four destroyed aircraft, disassembled them as much as possible, and used a combination of our Slipspace teleporters and our stealth tech to drop those pieces throughout a huge portion of their facilities.

Closets, offices, bedrooms, vehicles, bathrooms, board rooms, personal lounges, cafeterias, nothing was safe from our effort to prove that we could get anywhere we wanted. We distributed the thousands of individual 20mm rounds from each Thunderhawk alone, dropping them through every nook and cranny we could find.

In order to make this happen, once the combat in Night City was stable, Mary left the combat theater in Murtaugh's capable hands, with Kaytlyn and Riggs helping to fill in the gaps. Our incredibly powerful AI hacker used her abilities to find the plans for Militech facilities all across the country. We would then open a tear with the Slipspace translocator, which they had no way of detecting since the technology to do so didn't exist yet. A stealth probe would be stuck through the tear to hack and infiltrate an area. Once it was secure and connected, Mary would use that deep access to cut into the security structure without a trace.

We would then distribute the wrecks as we saw fit. It was more or less random what went where, but I did make sure that a now disabled missile, bent and ruined by the crash, but still recognizable, was placed directly on CEO Lucas Hardford's desk.

The operation took a few hours, so it was unavoidable that some of the items were found and moved before we could place the others, but we were lucky enough to get some of the big chunks, like the majority of the aircraft seats and console, into more impactful places, like a lounge where several executives spent their free time.

In total, we sequestered nearly thirty thousand pieces throughout Militech facilities, from corporate buildings to research facilities, and even military bases. The threat was obvious, and the statement of our superiority was clear.

Of course, we were not just leaving it to chance. Not only had we already significantly increased our forces across the city, but we had also put our sensors on high alert. Our stealth satellites were focused on Militech hotspots, facilities, and more, while Mary would devote a significant portion of her attention to their networks. She was using so much of her processing

power that I gave Noah the order to put together another computing center identical to her existing one and hook her up to it directly, so she would have even more computing power.

It also meant that we could create another Smart AI and slide them into the facility easily, so they could work together and split their duties. I was hesitant to do that without an emergency, though, as creating a being and immediately dropping them into combat was cruel.

On top of all that, Samwise was keeping an eye on the space-bound weapons above us, making sure that nobody, Militech or otherwise, got the grand idea to try and scour us off the face of the planet.

Our last task was to take all of the surviving Militech higher-ups, anyone who had any sort of power or pull, and ship them out of the city. We piled them into what were essentially blacked-out, military-grade buses before sending them off to the nearest Militech facility. It would be a seven-hour drive, but that was their problem, not ours.

The remaining employees were so low-level they weren't worth harassing, though they were added to Mary's ever-growing watch list.

When everything was finally starting to settle down, our message was sent, and the last Militech employees were gathered up and shipped out, our meeting reconvened. This time we were meeting in the vault courtyard. Deputy Commissioner Drake was back in the city, making final preparations for her own coup, which would be happening in just two days, the eleventh day of my cycle, the second to last before I would roll my next tech tree.

By then, we would be ready to dedicate even *more* Spartans to assist the police force after Drake had cleared out the corrupt and twisted cops from the force. After that, we would be doing the same thing to the government that we did to Militech, with Arasaka next on the chopping block.

"The question is, should we make a statement now, or wait until after everything has happened?" Sable asked as we discussed the next few days. "They likely don't expect it, a normal corporation wouldn't, but explaining what is going on would help. The city would happily turn against Militech with the right statement, they don't have nearly the brand loyalty here that Arasaka has, and even that can be neutralized with normal dislike of mega corporations."

"To make it convincing, you would have to reveal a lot," Kaytlyn pointed out. "Assuming you're not looking to just lie, then you would have to explain what you are doing, and what's next, or the response will be more annoyed than grateful that you are explaining the situation."

"Is there really no middle ground?" I asked, leaning back in my seat. "Just explain that Militech tried to stop us from making the city a better place, so we kicked them out of the city? It's not like people couldn't see this was a fight between Militech and us, so hiding that is pointless."

"Realistically, how long until we control the city and can explain what's going on?" Rebecca asked.

"Likely five days," Mary responded. "Though that does not include any stretches of time wasted by Arasaka or any other corporation. If they decide to interfere, then we will have to engage with them."

"Not like anyone in the know won't put two and two together," Kaytlyn pointed out. "If Militech saw it, then Arasaka has seen it coming too, same with everyone else."

"... Mary, have you seen any data saying that anyone is pulling out of Night City?" I asked, raising an eyebrow. "Employees being transferred, branch managers taking vacations, cuts in funding, or anything like that?"

"There is some," Mary admitted. "A few higher-ups are being sent elsewhere, a few transfers. There is also a significant buildup in security. Not as much as you would expect."

"We are moving too fast," Sable explained, shaking her head. "A CEO may lead the company, but they can't do much without board members chiming in. Closing down from a place like Night City isn't something you can just make happen in a day or so. They likely realize there is no point from their perspective, since they wouldn't be able to do much."

"They also probably expected you to play the game," Kaytlyn pointed out. "You're not the first person to preach care to the masses, but you are the first in a long time who isn't doing it for their own benefit."

"So they expect me to take control and what, just keep the status quo? Back room business deals and the like?" I asked, scoffing at the idea. "Idiots."

"You're an outlier," Sable pointed out. "This whole venture would be impossible without the tech you have brought to the table. To them, the truth is so ridiculous, they just assume something else, something predictable is going on. Although after what we just did to Militech, they are going to start asking a lot more questions about what we are capable of."

"I'm not overly concerned about revealing some of our tech, even something like our ability to teleport," I admitted. "It's just about time that we stop holding back, so letting some things slip is fine, especially since Samwise's plan to neutralize our biggest threat, the many weapons in space aiming down at Earth, is around ninety percent completed. Militech's weapon satellites and stations were neutralized completely several days ago."

"What about normal weapons, like from the ground?" Jackie asked. "Can we stop those?"

"Yes. We have had missile defenses up for nearly two weeks," I revealed. "We could detect a nuclear ICBM before it even enters our hemisphere, and before it gets even close to us. Our time to start pushing is very quickly approaching. Taking and securing Night City is really our last step. After that..."

I trailed off, not really needing to explain just how... intense things were looking to get.

Mary Interlude -

All across the country, Militech's networks were on fire.

She watched them all, her focus split hundreds of thousands of times, each wire, each fiber in the network vibrating and straining, like the plucked strings of a violin. Her computing potential was spread a bit thin, but even as she was watching, that was being fixed, as a new computing core was being put together.

Eventually, according to Jackson, the room would house her sibling, another Smart AI who would help share her load. She found herself being excited by that concept, wondering what her sibling would be like, who would act as the base, and what their personality would be like.

She paused for a moment as a high-priority message crossed along the Militech network. It was *supposed* to be subtle, a slip of data piggybacking on normal background data, something no one would notice. Unfortunately for the department head who sent the message, with how deeply she had cut into their systems, it might as well have had sirens on it, screaming out her name and flashing bright lights.

One of her many parallel processors scanned the message as it “passed,” peeling off a copy of the message without leaving a trace. A quick scan showed that it contained more or less the same thing that *all* of the messages on the network did. Panic, confusion, desperation, and horror. The department head, this one in charge of their blood replacement division, had found a hunk of scrap from one of the Thunderhawks in the back seat of his personal vehicle, its presence completely unknown to his chauffeur until the man sat in the back seat.

It also had his mistress's address engraved on the side, an added layer of warning and torment.

She flicked the message to her mass storage, idly noting that it was labeled as unimportant as she filed it away. They already had plenty of information on the author of the message, after all, they didn't need him panicking about it on record.

As the network continued to buzz and burn, Mary dove deeper, shifting through the halls of data as easily as a human could breathe. None of their security could come close to resisting her. Not even the hundreds of netrunners manning the Net around Militech Tower in Washington, D.C. could keep her out. She was already inside, after all, smoothing her entrance and exit like they had rolled out the red carpet for her.

As she slid into the massive tower's network, which was just under the size of the Gemini Towers, she made a beeline for the top floors, where a Lucas Hardford was having a meeting.

“HOW DID THEY DO THIS?” he screamed, throwing a water jug at the wall, the fine crystal shattering, drenching the carpet.

Perhaps it was more accurately called a meltdown.

"Reports are coming in from EVERYWHERE!" the CEO shouted. "Thousands of security breaches were done in just a few hours, under everyone's noses. And not a *single* person saw a thing? Not a *single* camera saw anything?!"

"We know their stealth-"

"I don't want to hear more about their bullshit stealth!" He shouted, cutting off one of the company's head of security, looking like he was about to throw something at him. "I've heard enough about it to last me a lifetime! I want to hear how we missed EVERYTHING!"

"Sir," One of the aides, someone low enough on the totem pole that they had to ask permission to voice opinions, spoke up quietly.

The man with whom the aide had arrived was giving them a hard look, as if daring him to speak, but Lucas fixed them with an annoyed glance, gesturing for them to speak.

"What? Spit it out!"

"I... I looked into some of the other systems," they explained, stumbling once but pushing through. "According to the temperature control system... every room where an object was found experienced a drop in temperature."

"... What?"

"The systems all registered drops in temperature, and were forced to compensate," they continued to explain. "It's consistent with every example I can access."

"...why wasn't I told sooner?" Lucas asked, his eyes returning to the man with whom the aid had arrived. "I've been demanding information for HOURS!"

"We know nothing about the phenomenon," the man responded. "Yes, it's ubiquitous, but we don't know what causes it. Without a cause, it's simply background information."

"I think you will find that I am perfectly capable OF MAKING THE DECISION FOR MY SELF!" Lucas shouted, leaning over the table, his hand flat on its surface. "I... Fucking hell. Everyone out but Anderson."

"Sir, I-"

"I SAID OUT!"

That got people jumping, and Mary chuckled a bit as the people all but ran from the room, many leaving their things behind. When the room was empty, save Lucas Hardford and his intelligence head, the CEO spoke again.

"What's the news from Night City?"

"The conflict has all but ended," The stoic man responded. "We have lost contact with all facilities, even those not openly declared as Militech. Survivors who surrendered have been shipped out and are on route to be dropped off at our closest facility outside the city."

"Take them in, quietly execute them," Lucas said without missing a beat.

"Of course," He agreed with a nod. "From what we can gather, which is not much considering all of our operatives are now dead, Tinkertech forces have massively increased. Not only did they deploy a massive force to push us out, but all of their security has also increased substantially."

"All of that, plus whatever they did to spread the Hawks around the country," Lucas added, Anderson nodding in confirmation. "Where did this come from? How did we miss it?"

"We based our projections on what we knew," Anderson explained with a shrug. "We couldn't predict they would have so many soldiers in reserve."

Silence fell over the meeting room, Lucas pushing off the table and turning, approaching the large window overlooking Washington DC. After a full two minutes, Anderson spoke up.

"While their forces are impressive for what we predicted, we still outnumber them overall," he pointed out. "It would only take a few hours to put together a force capable of-"

"Are you out of your mind?" Lucas asked, turning around to look at his subordinate with an incredulous face. "After what they did? I had a fucking missile in my *office*, and the only lead we have is that the heating kicked on! We do anything else, and we are all liable to wake sharing beds with nukes!"

Silence reigned over the room for a few seconds before Lucas finally spoke up again.

"Night City is a no-go zone until I say otherwise," He ordered, waiting for Anderson to nod before continuing. "I want eyes on it twenty for seven. I don't care how many satellites you have to shift to make it happen. And get Rosa on the phone, maybe her people have gotten some more information."

Mary split off another process to listen in on the CEO's next meeting, while her core pulled out, her attention shifting as she slid out of the huge tower undetected.

As she did, she was already reaching out a tendril of code to Jackson. He would want to know what she had seen.