

Jackie Welles

Jackie stepped through the teleporter, appearing inside the teleport hub connected to the massive vault mall. He had told Jay that he would talk to Misty to see if she could help, but it was far too late for anything like that. Misty would be asleep in bed, and Jackie was far from ready for that. So, instead, he took the teleporter to the mall, walking quietly through the huge, shockingly quiet space.

He walked past a beautiful garden area, filled with growing trees, grass, and flowers. Usually, the sight and smell of real, growing plants and flowers were enough to make him pause to take a look, but his mind was spinning far too fast for him to even take notice.

As he wandered, he tried to organize his thoughts. Just how successful he was was debatable, especially considering he had yet to realize he was still wearing his armor.

Eventually, after wandering around for quite some time, he arrived at one of the many food shops that dotted the underground mall. It was a chocolate shop, and though many of the shelves were empty, some of the boxes by the front counter were stocked. Though the empty shelves looked strange and added to the mall's weirdness, there wasn't much point in stocking such a large space when their group was the only people around. As he approached the front desk, the service robot standing behind the cash register slowly booted up.

"Greetings, customer," they said happily. "How may I help you?"

"Don't mind me, I just need a few things," Jackie responded, poking around at the few stocked shelves. The service robot said nothing, as while the infrastructure for eddies was in place, none of the many stalls, stores, or entertainment options actually charged money.

Apparently, it was only a flick of the switch away, but for now, Jay saw no reason to charge any of his friends for stuff he could basically make for free.

Jackie stacked a few random boxes of chocolate into his hands before heading back out of the shop. He continued to walk until he reached a large water feature in the middle of the intersection between four large halls. He sat along the granite edge and placed his food beside him. He then struggled with his helmet for a few minutes, finally getting it to pop off. He placed the surprisingly compact helmet off to the side, ignoring it when it rolled off into the fountain behind him.

Instead, he grabbed a bar of chocolate, one of the more basic things he had grabbed, peeling it open and taking a sniff. The bar looked a bit small in his hands, but the illusion disappeared when he brought it to his mouth.

Re-creating actual chocolate from the ground up had been one of his proudest achievements working with Frank. It was a complicated, delicate, and specific flavor, so while they could print out close facsimiles by the ton, getting the flavor perfect had been incredibly difficult. The trick had been to create a sort of solid cocoa bar, which tasted horrible on its own,

as well as dairy bars, which contained a lot more than just dairy, but since they were an off-white, that's what he and Frank called them. You then melted the two together, and the result was a chocolate that was miles better than what anybody else had access to, save for some of the richest people on the planet.

And people in Africa, according to Jackson.

He took a bite of the chocolate bar, letting the flavors roll around in his mouth. It was a dark chocolate, and each square had a core of a raspberry filling that was both sweet and tart. It was well-balanced, and the flavors worked well together, though it was still a bold combination. If he were aiming for a larger crowd, he would have used milk chocolate instead, maybe...

The larger man let out a long sigh, resisting the urge to toss the candy bar away. Since meeting and befriending Jackson, so much had changed, with his connection with cooking being the most obvious. He had dabbled in cooking before, remaking some of his mother's recipes mostly, but it had seemed so boring. Now, with Frank and him creating new ingredients almost every day, it seemed so incredibly exciting. Trying new things, uncovering old recipes, remaking foods, and creating things everyone could enjoy had quickly become his new obsession.

Something about cooking for other people was just... It filled a void he didn't know he had. Not to mention, he was happy that his friends and family seemed to like his new hobby, even beyond the delicious things he had created.

And now everything was changing.

His desire to be a Night City legend went back all the way to when his old man was still around, when the bastard did his best to crush his mother and him under his boot. When Jackie had finally snapped, his drive to become the best, to make sure his name was one said in awe, and no small part of fear, had combined with his desire to prove his father wrong, to prove that he could be the best.

It had been the driving force for most of his adult life. Now it was rapidly becoming a smaller and smaller part of why he got up every morning. And then Misty had come home from a short visit with Vik, and everything had changed.

Suddenly, even his cooking seemed like a small corner of his life. Going out tonight had proven it. He had finally achieved what he had always wanted. He had the ability to become a legend, to step into Night City's history and make his mark.

And it all seemed pointless compared to two words uttered by Misty, with a small nervous smile on her lips and watery eyes, tears trailing down her cheeks, unsure of how she should be feeling.

"I'm pregnant."

He had scooped her up in his arms, wrapped her in a tight, but cautious hug, careful not to hurt her. He had assured her he was ecstatic, that he couldn't be happier. And he was! It was

still too early to tell people, but he couldn't wait to tell Jackson and everyone. Even now, just the thought brought a shine to his thoughts that couldn't be erased. He was going to be a dad!

And yet it had also crushed his first dream flat.

To be fair, his dream was already dying, starving as he continually focused on other, more interesting things. He spent hours and hours in a lab of all things, learning and working to make new foods. Not to mention how much time he spent experimenting with actual cooking. But between the amazing news and the utter lack of any sort of feeling from going out and clearing out the scavs...

Jackie grabbed another one of his "purchases," this time a box of chocolates. He carefully opened it up, revealing two dozen different chocolate-covered mounds. The cover probably would have told him just what each one was, but he picked one at random, tossing it into the air and easily catching it in his mouth. The chocolate broke easily, revealing a thick cherry-flavored ganache. Not as intense as cherry cordial, but still a nice flavor. The chocolatier robots working in the shop seemed to know what they were doing and were taking old recipes and making them real.

He put the tray of chocolates down, chewing the treat carefully, trying to put together just how he felt. His old dream was dead, he had felt that in his heart as he worked with Jackson to clear the scavs just a short while ago. He had achieved the pinnacle, and now he didn't care. But a new dream had replaced it, one that he enjoyed, that didn't pull at his soul like killing did. It was new and fun and interesting, and he would give it all up in a moment for a child he had never even met, a child still too small to see with human eyes.

In the moment he was just reaching for his dream, it stopped mattering in the slightest.

After a few more minutes, and a few more samples of chocolate, Jackie stood from his seat and headed back to the chocolate shop. Having now confirmed that the chocolate was pretty good, he felt much more comfortable giving Misty a box. He grabbed a much larger box this time, a heart-shaped one, and placed it into a bag provided by the shop robot. Carefully carrying the bag, he made his way to the teleport hub, traveling to Samwise's personal workshop. Jay had been on his way to bed, but hopefully Samwise, or one of his assistants, would be able to help.

With any luck, they would know how to replace one of the chocolates inside the box with a diamond ring, without opening it first.

Sarah Kato

Sara Kato stood inside a laundromat, the same laundromat she had been using for ten years now. Previously, when she used to do her weekly task, she would stare ahead blankly, watching her laundry spin around and around. It was that, or she would absently pick at the

stickers attached to one of the dryers. It was all she could do, as she was usually too tired to do much else after working for almost the entire day.

Over the last few weeks, though, her routine had changed. Now she looked out the window, up across the street and over the buildings, looking up toward the Tinkertech Towers. They had yet to be officially named, but that didn't stop them from being the topic on everyone's mind, especially anyone living in Watson.

Everyone was watching them, as they seemed to get taller any time you looked away. Completely visible from almost anywhere in the city, their exterior seemed to be finished, and they towered over everything. Even the buildings in the City Center were inferior, though they still got in the way if you were behind them. The entirety of Night City had watched these two buildings grow, from the people on the streets to the people living at the tops of corpo towers. Everyone was wondering what would happen next.

About two weeks into their construction, notifications started to go out, advertisements for rooms to rent. Thousands of apartments, all shockingly luxurious, especially given the prices they were asking. Multiple rooms, air filtration, free utilities, and even built-in washers and dryers.

Sarah glanced over at her clothes, still tumbling in the dryer. As always, she struggled to keep her mind off just how much she must have spent on washing her clothes in this place. Surely she would have been able to afford her own machines by now, if her tiny apartment cube had had the room.

Several of her friends were already talking about moving, and with the opening day approaching fast, signing up to move in was sounding more and more tempting. People living in her area, the outskirts of Northside, even got priority acceptance, with a partial reduction in rent.

Most assumed that it was an attempt to clear room for more construction, but whether that was a good or bad thing was not something people agreed on. Personally, Sarah had been burned too many times to believe that Jackson, the enigmatic corpo responsible for the large construction projects, was simply being kind for the sake of it.

Though she had to give it to them, he certainly didn't slow down. Despite the two large construction projects, his company also released its amazing food products, cleared out the Maelstrom from Watson, and, as of last night, crushed the scavs throughout the entire city. Not to mention the complete transformation of Rocky Ridge from a complete ghost town to a bustling small community. A friend of a friend was now working in their factories, and apparently, the entire place was secure and friendly, with real food for cheap and accommodations that boggled the mind.

Her friend was already hoping to get a job when the next wave of factories were complete.

A few months ago, she would have been shocked to hear that a company could get all that done in a year. Now, after seeing the towers rise in *weeks* and other changes in months, all at the hands of Tinkertech and their eccentric CEO, she didn't know what to think.

What she did know was that the tension was starting to grow as the opening day for the towers and the moving-in day scheduled for the day after drew closer. Was the CEO a genuine philanthropist who just wanted to help, or was there something else at play? Nightmare guesses at just what was going to happen, about what sort of horrible things they must be doing in order to have the prices that low, for an apartment that good.

Of course, some of those conspiracy theories were put to rest when the press was given an open tour of the beach resort.

Sarah resisted the urge to turn and look towards the ocean, as there was no way she would be able to see it from here. She had gotten a few looks at the newly finished area, both through the news and with her own eyes. Her second job, cleaning apartments, sometimes took her to the [Arasaka Megabuilding](#). She had to admit, without the massive projected obfuscating light show in place, the beach looked amazing.

She didn't know ocean water could look so... clean.

The press that was let inside had visited almost every inch of the resort, from the beach to the basements, even into their cleaning rooms. It was all immaculate, without a single thing looking out of place. The amount of robotic help was astounding, but according to Jackson, the plan was to replace all of it with normal staff over time.

Sarah couldn't help but scoff, shaking her head. She absently stepped forward as the drying cycle finally finished, the dryer clicking as she opened it. If there was any reason to doubt his sanity, that was it. The golden-clad corpo had a completely automated workforce, the perfect workers who never got tired or made mistakes, with no need to ever hire and pay a person, and yet he promised that with time, every single one of his robots would be replaced. There were only two ways he was being truthful about that. He was either insane or there was some sort of catch, something to use people and make it worth his money.

She shook her head and pulled the laundry from the machine, stuffing it into her bag. She would have liked to stick around and fold it, but staying out too long in Watson was just asking for trouble. Though, admittedly, that had gotten a lot better over the last few months.

She left the laundromat at a quick pace, making her way to her apartment. It wasn't too far, only a ten-minute walk, and she quickly climbed up the stairs to her room, as the elevator was still broken. Once she was inside, she dumped her clothes onto her bed, but before she could start folding them, she noticed her computer was blinking. A few taps on the keyboard and she was looking through her messages, quickly spotting the new one.

A priority message from someone named Mary, with a job offer.

With a curious hum, Sarah sat down by her computer, and as she read, her eyes went wider and wider.

Luke Watts, Reporter

Luke liked to believe that he was a pretty decent reporter. He did his due diligence, only took bribes when they were for minor things, and refused to add sponsors in his reports unless the products actually worked and weren't dangerous. Measured against his peers, he was practically a saint.

Still, there were times he wished he could just write the same kind of nonsense that his peers did, and not feel like he was being a terrible person. The people he rubbed elbows with, the short-term reporters who were happy to report on rumors, could pump out article after article. It was impressive what you could do once you sold out and no longer cared about your own integrity. Meanwhile, he was *still* working on his report of the Tinkertech resort.

Not to mention, if he were less dedicated to the truth, he wouldn't be slowly crawling his way through the desert, slowly making his way closer to Rocky Ridge.

Most of his story was already done, he just couldn't finish it. The subject was important, of course. Everyone wanted every scrap of information on the eccentric Jackson and his project that could find. And yet, save for a few public appearances, he was a ghost. People tried to stake out the towers, the resort, even do what he was doing and get into Rocky Ridge, and yet no one could get more than a blurry snapshot. The few people brave enough to try to enter the town were turned away, and no one else was brave enough, or maybe stupid enough, to push with the kind of firepower they had running along the walls.

Not to mention the private security. First, the shockingly capable robots, now these seven-foot-tall elite soldiers.

The footage he had seen of them tearing through scavcs was both cathartic and terrifying. Cathartic because if there was anything anyone in Night City could agree on, it was that scavcs were scum, and terrifying because they were all scarily skilled and effective.

Made him feel kind of stupid for trying to sneak in.

But Luke desperately wanted to do an article about the entire organization, something actually revealing, something that would make his career. Unfortunately, his boss had passed the story about the scav raids to Jason, the prick. Jason barely did his research, and his report would likely devolve immediately into guessing who would win in a fight: these new soldiers or Adam Smasher. Never mind that Tinkertech had *hundreds* of its soldiers. No, that was likely beyond Jason's limited brain power.

Luke paused for a moment, his ears straining as he listened for anything close by. His stealth cyberware, a pretty serious amount of optical camo, had served him well over the years,

getting him in range of a lot of interesting stories. They had limits, however, which was why he was moving so slowly. This kind of investigative reporting took patience, skill, and finesse, the kind of qualities that bastard Jason utterly lacked.

Luke shook his head before wincing at the quick movement, stopping again to scan the walls. On this side alone, he could see nearly twenty of the tall armored soldiers. From the footage he had seen, he wouldn't stand a chance of escaping from any one of them, never mind twenty. Once again, he cursed himself, wondering why he was so determined to put himself at risk for his career. Wouldn't it be better to just coast, do what he was told, and not put himself at risk? He would live longer, certainly with less time in the hospital from being thrown out of places.

If he was honest, he didn't even hate the topic he had, he just hated how... simple the story was. When he went to the resort, he didn't really know what to expect, but he certainly didn't expect to see a perfectly normal resort. Sure, the fact that Jackson was filtering the water so that people could safely swim and enjoy the beach was interesting, but that was it. The water was actually safe, the system worked, and it was made properly.

The price of the resort rooms was also interesting, and a sign of the man's eccentric nature, but even that was most likely just a new business strategy.

What he really wanted to write about was who was pulling Jackson's strings, if anyone actually was. Most people assumed that he was just a puppet, since his meteoric rise and the speed at which his company grew could only be done with an insane level of support and resources.

Luke desperately wanted to see what was behind the curtain, see what was going on behind the walls that now surrounded Rocky Ridge. His boss would be pissed he was wasting his time, not doing what he was told, but if he broke some sort of story, it wouldn't matter. Any publication in the city, hell, plenty of places *outside* the city would hire him.

Breaking whatever was going on with Tinkertech and Rocky Ridge was the kind of story that could make a career.

Slowly but surely, he got closer and closer to the wall. It was an incredibly tedious process, crawling so slowly, especially since he had to go around to the front entrance. Unfortunately, it was the only way inside that didn't involve [fortified ankles](#) or [reinforced leg tendons](#).

Or one of the mini jetpacks that all of the combat members of the Tinkertech security force seemed to have. Another bit of astounding tech the group had access to. Sure, jetpacks existed, but no one had ever made something so precise and versatile at the same time.

The entrance into the town was getting closer and closer. Once he was inside the town, sneaking around would get significantly easier, as he could hide among buildings or around piles of trash. It wasn't glorious, but it worked. He just needed to-

"Alright, friend, I think that's far enough."

From beside him, someone disengaged an optical camo that put his to shame. They were sitting just a few feet away on a rock, wearing a black armored suit, and they faded in from being absolutely invisible, as if they hadn't existed. A moment later, another person faded in behind him. This one was armed with a very large weapon, one he recognized from the clips on the net. As he watched, the man sitting on the rock unsealed and pulled off a helmet, revealing Jackson, CEO of Tinkertech.

"Luke Watts, I can't say this was your smartest choice," he said, passing his helmet to the second armored man. "But Sable says you're not a half-bad reporter. So...how about we make a deal?"

Cassandra Arcturus

Cassie stared up at the glowing ceiling of her new room. There, projected onto the smooth surface, was an explosion of stars. Previously, it had been the night sky as she would have seen from Night City, if it weren't always so bright. But as of last night, it was the sky above Avalon, the sky of a planet that was super far away.

And yet she had been there! The woods were a bit dark and smelled weird, but they were also beautiful. The sky there was pretty too, so blue and clear. The night was amazing as well, so many stars and so much color. Jackson said it was something called a nebula, and that it was a cradle for baby stars, but all Cassie knew was that it looked really pretty. The two moons that floated together above the planet, and above her bed, looked amazing too. They didn't have names yet, but one was white like the moon above Earth, and the other was red, like Mars, but a bit darker. It would look a bit creepy, but because they were so close, they shared their light and made each other look just a little pink!

Or at least, that's according to Jackson. They had to leave before the moons and nebula came out, but Auntie Sable said that once they made sure the place was safe, then they could stay long enough to see it themselves.

As Cassie watched the unfamiliar but lovely sky, she wondered if her mom and dad would have liked to see it. Her eyes began to water, and she sniffed, but she quickly wiped away the tears.

So many conflicting emotions were stuffed into her head that she could barely think. It was worse when she was alone, when she couldn't distract herself with all of the cool and new things around her. When she was like this, all her thoughts pushed to the surface, and she couldn't help but think them.

Her mom and dad were gone, so why didn't she miss them completely? She should, they were her parents, but...

Her mom liked to make her feel bad, making fun of her smile, her hair, and her refusal to get cosmetic cyberware, despite her insistence that she really needed them. Her dad didn't like to talk to her anymore, only shaking his head while giving her a look that made her feel useless. She wanted to be better for them, she wanted to be a good girl, but... she also knew parents weren't supposed to be like that.

Why did she miss them at the same time that she was glad to be with Auntie Sable? Why were there so many things stuffed inside her heart and her head?

The young girl slowly slid to the side of her bed, putting her feet into her slippers. They were a gift from Jackson after she mentioned the floors were cold sometimes, and they made a soft humming noise when she walked. They were really cute, super soft, and they made her feet all warm.

She quietly made her way to the front door, the thick metal panel opening quietly. The courtyard outside was dark, but there was enough light to walk around, and as she did, more small lights along the walkways lit up, guiding her to a bench. The courtyard was beautiful, with flowers, growing bushes, and grass. It was like the Corporate Plaza, but so much better.

After a few minutes of sitting in the garden, Cassie heard someone coming out of their room. A quick look showed it was Auntie Sable, the older woman, looking somewhat worried. She spotted Cassie immediately, making her way to the bench quietly.

"Can't sleep?" she asked as she sat down beside her. Cassie only shook her head in response.

Sable nodded, wrapping her arm around her shoulders, pulling her gently closer. After a few minutes of sitting together, Auntie Sable looked down at her and gave her a soft squeeze.

"What's wrong, Cas?" she asked.

"I... why do I miss them and don't miss them?" Cassie asked after a moment, feeling as if she were admitting she was a terrible daughter. "I know they were mean, and I know Mom didn't like me, and Dad hated me, but-"

"Your parents didn't hate you," Auntie Sable said quickly, cutting off her spiral. "They... It's complicated.

Auntie Sable looked away, staring at the nearby flowers for a long moment, chewing the inside of her lip. Cassie knew that her aunt wasn't the biggest fan of her parents, especially her mom, but she tried to keep her mean words about them away from Cassie.

"I think... I..."

Auntie Sable trailed off after barely starting to speak, losing the words before she even found them. After a long moment, she started again, letting out a long sigh.

"Jay... he has this theory that the world is unhealthy, and it's changing people," Auntie Sable eventually said. "People aren't meant to be so deeply violent, so angry, so mean. We aren't perfect by ourselves, but... with how bad things are around us, it's hard not to let it into our hearts. To let it change you. Sometimes, people get lost in the world, lost in how bad it is."

Cassie looked up at her aunt, listening closely as she leaned on her shoulder.

"I remember when you were born, your mother was so happy, so excited to have a daughter. And your dad, the first time he held you, it looked like he was holding the whole world in his hands," she said, a small smile on her face as she stared off at something Cassie couldn't see. "They were younger. Your mother wasn't obsessed with being the perfect socialite, and your father was less driven, less... Cold."

Auntie Sable trailed off, shaking her head after a moment.

"The point is, Cass, it's okay to miss the people your parents were, the people they could have been," She explained, looking down and revealing the tears that trailed from her eyes. "And be happy you're no longer with the people they became. It's not their fault, not really. And it's certainly not your fault either."

Cassie, who had been managing to more or less keep herself together, fell apart for the first time since the night she first woke up under her aunt's care. She cried, tears running down her face, broken down by what could have been, but could no longer ever be.