

Cyberpunk: Badland Madman Chapter 32 - Flying Bird, Rising Ranks, Galaxy Next Door, Seed & Invitation

Crunch!

Songbird lounged on a soft couch in her preem little corner office in NUSA's secret building in Washington, DC. She had been promoted to Chief Netrunning Advisor for the President, an official government position.

Crunch!

She chewed on some snacks made from real corn flour. Her back slouched against the headrest, one leg straight and the other lazily dangling to the floor. She stared at the massive TV on the side where news was running.

"That's fucking insane. Dude erased billions with one little speech. Guy's got balls of chrome," Songbird muttered, staring at Cypher Blackwell's face on the TV screen. "Cypher? What kinda name is that? Who the fuck names their kid Cypher?"

Crunch!

"It's badass though."

Her life had improved more than she wanted to accept. She no longer felt any pain when bypassing the Blackwall and moving across the Old Net thanks to Omnissiah, a name she now knew the meaning of. Her condition was still bad, but it wasn't degenerating any further. Moreover, she completed all the tasks Myers gave her and won her trust.

Of course, in the end, her true intention was to get access to the NUSA core data fortress that sat in the Orbit as well as the Pentagon. She was fully on board Omnissiah's plan, and if that would allow her freedom and better health, nothing else mattered.

Crunch!

"Myers' probably already planning to fuck the poor guy over," she muttered, chewing. "Fusion, anti-grav, fuck knows what else he's got. Kinda wanna meet him, though. Maybe he can cook me up a preem new FBC, something better."

Beep!

"Ms. So Mi, the President is asking for you."

Prez wants her favorite dog.

Songbird groaned and sat up, yawning.

She pressed a button on her table. "I'll be there in a sec."

####

Militech Offices, Corpo Plaza,

Militech was in chaos, but Meredith felt relieved that she wasn't close to it anymore. Director Goldstein's department oversaw the research and development of advanced, secret technologies. They had been working on Anti-Gravity for decades, but now some guy in a shack had done it.

They wanted fusion energy, however. Militech had needs, and if they could deploy the fusion reactors the fastest, they could ramp up their production and flood the market with their product, taking over some of Arasaka's market share.

It was all about speed now, a race against time on who would deploy the fusion reactors fastest. The designs were public now, and they were the same for everyone.

Sadly, Meredith had failed to realise that even if she wasn't connected to research and development, she was still connected to Cypher Blackwell. And as the only field officer who had met the man on multiple occasions, she found herself dragged into one conference room after another.

But she was never alone. Whatever question she was asked, she always answered perfectly. After all, there was Omnisiah's voice right inside her ears, assisting her so she didn't speak too much. But she knew this was also a warning. If Cypher Blackwell wanted, he could fry her brain at any moment.

And now, of all people, she was dragged into a conference room that was top secret. She sat right behind General Young, dressed in military attire. Other seats were occupied by high-ranking Militech executives. And finally, on the large screen at the end of the oval table, the face of NUSA President Rosalind Myers appeared.

"Make this quick!" The President demanded, seated cross-armed behind the table. The NUSA flag was behind her. The interior of the Oval Office was very recognisable.

"We can deploy the reactors across NUSA's core facilities before 2066 ends." Lucas Harford, the CEO of Militech, said. "By the middle of 2077, we'll have them everywhere."

"We have only two months left before year's end." President Myers sounded distinctly unsatisfied. "Don't offer me timelines you can't follow. Arasaka has already commenced construction in Tokyo. Their material monopoly across Asia is already established."

"We have all the materials ready, Madam President. We just need to put them together. The design Cypher Blackwell made doesn't rely on too much new tech. Whatever's new, Obsidian is

selling to everyone. He refused any exclusive contract," Lucas Harford explained before Myers could ask more.

"Since when has Militech grown so timid? He is a single man."

"He's not," General Young voiced. Our investigation shows he's backed by netrunners. We believe they're better than any netrunners any corporation on Earth has. The music in Mr. Blackwell's clubs is lost media from pre-DataKrash. We have reason to believe he's actively bypassing the Blackwall and interacting with the Old Net. It's possible Mr. Blackwell found IEC's data fortress that held their lost fusion reactor research. But neither Militech nor NetWatch has found any evidence. Our ears in Arasaka hear the same."

President Myers's gaze narrowed on the big screen. Only ten people were in that conference room; each one was either at the top or had something to do directly with that matter. The CEO, General Young, but then there was one blonde woman seated stiffly.

"You." President Myers pointed directly at Meredith. "Major Stout, was it? I received the report on your recent achievements. You were present when Director Goldstein met Blackwell. What sort of man is he? Spare me what I've already read. Tell me what you thought."

Meredith stiffened, but she maintained an elegant posture, used to dealing with occupational pressure now. But she didn't need to think too long as words of Omnissiah entered her sensors, directly into her ears. That demonic voice was a thing of her nightmares.

But she followed the instructions.

"Madam President, Cypher Blackwell is a madman who is fixated on pre-war America, pre-conflict, pre-fragmentation. He directly challenged Director Goldstein and blamed him and the prior generation for systemic collapse.

"He's fiercely patriotic, but considers NUSA corrupt and incapable of restoring the America he envisions. He's unstable, unpredictable, sexually volatile, and highly motivated. He may have personnel assisting him, but Blackwell is the principal mind behind these inventions."

With every word, Meredith felt scared. What she was saying directly exposed Cypher Blackwell. This was like betraying the trust of that man. But she was scared of Omnissiah just as much, and believed there must be a reason behind it.

"So we're dealing with a once-in-a-century genius who also happens to be a madman?" President Myers exclaimed with annoyance. "At least he loves America. And given what Arasaka has done to this world, the odds of him colluding with them are minimal.

"Major Stout, you will join General Young's team and find a way to bring him to our side. If he wants to rebuild America, good. If he wants to unify America, better. If he wants to improve people's lives, excellent.

“Let him do it while we concentrate on keeping America’s enemies at bay.”

Meredith just nodded. She couldn't help but feel how wrong President Myers was. The Cypher Blackwell she knew didn't want to be someone's tool. That man wanted to be the hand on the leash that would drag America back to its feet. And that meant snapping a few very important necks.

Everyone in that room was marked for death; they just didn't know it yet.

“Now, I have other matters demanding my attention. My Chief Netrunning Advisor will brief you on the new safety measures concerning this Blackwell.”

Right away, the screen turned to black. But then another office appeared on the screen; an Asian woman with clearly very heavy chrome appeared on screen, her hair was a purple and pink gradient, dressed in an office suit. NUSA's flag was behind her on the wall.

"I'm sure you're all busy, so let's get this over with. I have found multiple vulnerabilities in Militech systems that not only Blackwell, but also Arasaka could exploit. Thankfully, it's hidden pretty deep..."

Meredith was listening initially, but then her optics shifted, and she zoomed in on the screen. Not on the Asian woman's face, but a tiny pin on the woman's suit's collar. It was red, just the face of the creature, red hood, mechanical skull-face, a mask on the nose, round eyes. It was tiny, but so distinct. Omnissiah's symbol.

The realisation struck her. This meant Cypher Blackwell had infiltrated the highest level of NUSA government. The President's closest advisor was compromised. The best-known netrunner in NUSA.

Her palms became sweaty on her skirt. But then came Omnissiah's voice inside her head, and it shook her.

[Meredith Stout, check your skirt's right pocket.]

She did that subtly and felt something. Something tiny. She took it out, and to her surprise, it was a replica of the pin the woman on the screen was wearing. The problem was, she didn't remember receiving it, or putting it there. That meant someone else had done it, and that further meant that she wasn't alone in Militech working for Cypher Blackwell.

[Wear it on your collar.]

She tried to make as little movement as possible and pinned it on her military blazer's collar. It helped that everyone there was focused on the screen.

For some time, nothing happened. But then, halfway through that briefing, she noticed the president's Chief Netrunning Advisor glance at her, and their eyes met. Meredith knew she was exposed to that person.

[Do not be concerned. The pins are visible only to the two of you. Henceforth, Song So Mi will provide you with direct Militech intelligence, keeping you ahead of those around you and facilitating your rise through the ranks.]

Just like that, she now had access to the highest decision-making office of NUSA, and also Militech unofficially. This was something no amount of money could buy. One needed real connections.

Meredith couldn't decide if she should feel scared, impressed, excited, or trapped.

I want to meet Mr. Blackwell.

She spoke in her mind, aware that Omnissiah heard it all.

[You shall meet him when you are required to hear him. Fulfill what is asked of you, and you shall be rewarded.]

Meredith just nodded, her fists clenched under the table. She felt suffocated there, but focused on the screen. The advisor was listing some high-ranking spec-ops operatives that Arasaka was gathering.

She didn't hear from Omnissiah again after that.

#####

Little China, Watson,

Cypher got into Panam's truck, and she started driving right away.

"Stunning as always," Cypher said, adjusting the seat as he looked over at the nomad woman. "When'd you guys leave the party last night?"

"Judy and I drank for hours. Ended up waking at her place, actually," Panam said, fixing the loose strands falling across her face. She had on her jeans and green leotard, while her jacket sat in the backseat. "You clearly had a hell of a night out there."

"Yeah, I kinda let myself go. Rita gave me some weird pill and... yeah, I've got regrets. Oh, drive me to the nearest NCPD station. I gotta pay some fines."

Panam gave him a look but didn't say anything about it.

There was a strange silence that day, and Cypher could feel it. The way Panam was acting, it felt more restrained and hesitant. And he tried to think of what he did last night. In the end, he remembered how he'd kissed Judy in public.

She's sad?

He looked at Panam's face, gorgeous. He noticed her eyes stealing glances at him at times.

"What?" Panam asked.

"Nothing. You seem kinda different today. You pissed at me or something?"

"Why would I be angry at you? Last night was a damn blast. My family watched the live broadcast of your showcase. They're all impressed and pretty excited to have your support."

"You sound robotic." He poked Panam's bare shoulder, pressing his finger into her soft skin.

"Where's my hot-headed, ass-kicking Panam?"

"I'm not hot-headed. I just have a very low tolerance for idiots."

"Yeah, sure. And I'm a perfectly well-adjusted virgin monk," Cypher said and leaned sideways over the truck's dashboard, using his elbow as a support so he could stare at Panam's face directly. "I do something to you last night? Rita's pill has a memory-fucking feature."

"No, you did nothing. I actually enjoyed dancing with you. I'm just tired, I guess. Drank a lot last night."

But Cypher saw the way she tried not to look at him. She seemed hurt. "Is this about Judy?"

"Uh, what?" Panam nearly swerved into a car. "What do you mean? Judy's sweet, and I like her. You two looked pretty close to me. You two together, then?"

At least she asked.

Cypher shook his head. "Nope, ain't dating. I know, I kissed her. She's into girls, though. Only girls. But for some damn reason, she thinks my dumb ass is attractive. Says she wants to explore things without going through the whole drill-in-the-hole bit."

A frown marred Panam's thin brows. "So... you're not dating?"

"I don't think so. Honestly, I got no idea. My life's pretty fucked up, and I ain't in a place where I can commit anywhere. Judy's sweet, she's kind to me, and she literally saved my life that one time. But I ain't crossing that line unless she tells me to... Wait a second, why're you even asking me this?"

"No reason."

Cypher stared at her face intently. Of course, he knew everything. But he personally had no clue how to handle this thing. The Panam he knew was a ride-or-die woman who valued loyalty. And he really couldn't promise her that because it meant breaking Judy's heart.

"If you say so. How's everything at your nomad camp? You're the boss now, right? Saul bitter about it? And did you ever get in touch with the main Aldecaldos base?"

Panam seemed relieved he had changed the subject, that familiar fire returning to her voice. "He was bitter at first, but he sees what I'm doing for the family now. We're not starving anymore. And I'm trying to convince the Aldecaldos around Night City first. Maybe one of them knows how to contact the base."

"You don't know how to reach the base?"

"Aldecaldos are always on the move, so we don't know where they are right now. But I will find out soon enough, Cyph. You know I will. Trust me."

"I trust you. Thing is, I'm pretty damn close to figuring out a crop that'll grow out in the Badlands. But if we're gonna grow it at scale and keep the corpos from screwing with it, I need people. Folks to work the farms and folks to guard what we're growing," Cypher said plainly, relaxed back in his seat.

Right around that time, Panam took the final turn and stopped in front of a police station. But her focus was only on him as she stared at his face.

"Can you repeat that? A crop that'll grow out there?" Panam asked. She had seen much of America as a nomad, and being able to grow food and survive on it was the ultimate dream of most Aldecaldo families.

Ecological collapse, devastating animal and crop plagues, and corporate monopolies had starved much of that part of the world. And most had even forgotten to bother with that dream, while some grew desperate like Saul.

"Yeah," Cypher said casually, grabbing the door handle and getting ready to head out. "Probably gonna be basic shit like corn and wheat at first. It's gonna take time to gene-edit the whole menu of seeds. Anyway, I'll be back in a minute."

Thud!

With that, Cypher got out. He took one last glance before entering the police station.

Panam was still staring at him through the truck's window.

#####

Panam didn't know for how long she stared at the police station's gate.

"Do you even understand what you are saying?" She barked, a flicker of annoyance crossing her face before softening. She was talking to the air. "Food that grows in the Badlands? Come on."

And knowing Cypher, she was damn sure the man wasn't going to charge money for it. And that was why she felt so conflicted. So unworthy of even hoping to have something with him. She felt tiny in comparison, her actions barely helping her own nomad family, while Cypher was helping the entire world.

After spending a night with Judy and learning more about Cypher from the time before she'd met him, she felt even more humbled. The man was probably a billionaire and lived in a shack, all alone. Owned and ran a BD business that was helping countless Joytoys and BD actresses and actors find a safe and profitable lifestyle. Countless cyberware now used Obsidian's batteries as they were just that much better.

In a matter of months, a man who came out of nowhere did so much. All the while she had lived her entire life a nobody. A wild, money-chasing merc with big dreams.

Besides, Cypher had already told her his plans that night by the bonfire. That he dreamt of reaching the stars. Back then, she didn't know he was days from announcing infinite energy and anti-gravity. Now, she felt it was only a matter of time.

"He'll leave for the stars, and I'll be..."

Thud!

She stopped mumbling as the door opened and Cypher jumped back inside. For some reason, Cypher was now wearing an NCPD jacket and held boxes of NCPD promotional merchandise.

"Hah, they fucking swarmed me for autographs and photos. Sorry I kept you waiting, Pan. Let's get to the Continental now. I'm gonna treat you to a fine lunch."

Her hands moved like autopilot, and she started driving, her thoughts too occupied.

####

Cypher was at a loss.

He saw Panam's absentmindedness as she drove; even the radio was off. He knew the reasons, at least he thought he did. But there was nothing he could do to help. Not unless she asked him openly. He tried to make up for it and took her to a nice real lunch.

He talked a lot. About his short-term plans, his intention of starting an AV company. But for the most part, Panam replied with short responses. She didn't seem angry, but lost.

"Atlas? What's the analysis?"

[Self-worth, Cyph. Your achievements in such a short time make others question their own value. They compare themselves to you without meaning to, and it hurts them. Judy feels it. Panam feels it most. You've helped her, her nomad family, and now with food. Beside your footprint, she feels insignificant.]

Of course, Cypher could rely on his best friend. Atlas knew everything through simple deductions.

"But I never asked them for a damn thing. I ain't no genius either. I'm just a fraud with some weird itches."

[That does not alter the fact that you are creating things that will fundamentally change this planet and the lives of everyone on it. Panam is also romantically attracted to you, but believes she does not deserve you. She is beginning a cycle of self-loathing and questioning her own inadequacies.]

Panam was still driving her truck, taking him to his Lake farm. He glanced at the nomad woman and sighed.

"She's a million times better than me, man. Two lives, and I was a loser in one and a degenerate junkie in the other. Still kinda am. Shit, I've only been in this body a minute, while she's spent decades surviving this hell. She's a fucking badass."

[You, too, remain trapped in a cycle of self-loathing and self-questioning, much like her.]

"..."

Cypher didn't respond. Atlas' words just suddenly struck him deeply. Maybe his AI friend was right. He did need mental help.

"But my loathing's based on facts. Hers is based on not knowing I'm a fraud."

[An invention isn't invalidated because you didn't conceive every part of it. Your itches are gifts. What matters is how you use them. You chose kindness. You chose to help others. That is what makes you a winner or a loser.]

Cypher scratched his beard.

"Alright, enough about me. What do I do about Panam? I want her to feel important. She does have an impact on me, at least."

[Be honest about your feelings. There is no need to overshare.]

Nodding, he dumbly stared at Panam's face like a puppy waiting for an ice cream cup at a drive-through. He did that until she noticed it. But she didn't look at him until they arrived at Lake Farm.

He didn't get out, and kept staring.

"Something's on my face?"

"Panam, I'm a dumbass who can't always tell what's what. But I ain't blind. I'm good with tech, and you're damn good at being you. So pick a lane. You're a nomad family leader now. Next step's swallowing the nearby Aldecaldos and building one big family out of the lot."

Panam still seemed confused.

Cypher didn't wait; he opened the truck's door and got out. He walked around the front and reached Panam's window. He leaned in, folding his arms on the window's frame, poking his head inside.

He'd rarely gotten this close to her before. But he wanted her to feel what he felt, even if he couldn't say anything.

"Panam." Cypher reached for her face with a hand, and caressed her cheek, his fingertips brushing into her hair. "Life'd be hella boring without you around. So stick around, alright? At least till we both land on Mars. Hell, maybe Titan. Or the galaxy next door."

"..."

For a few long moments, he stayed there, his thumb gently caressing the corner of her lips.

Panam stared at him like an owl the entire time. The wild woman was, for once, speechless.

"Drive safe." Cypher finally drew his hand back, ready to leave.

"Wait!"

Panam's hand came fast and grabbed his white labcoat's collar, and tugged his head back inside the truck's window.

"Galaxy next door. You said it, not me!" Panam blurted.

"Huh? What do y—"

Before he could finish, Panam's face crept in, and her lips touched his for barely a second. Not even enough to fully register.

"Don't regret it later, Cypher Blackwell."

As fast as she had grabbed him, she let him go. The truck's engine revved loudly, and before he could say anything, it drove away with a cloud of dust behind it.

Cypher watched the truck speed away dumbly.

"Did I say too much, Atlas?"

Atlas' old Morgan Freeman-like figure appeared beside him, arms crossed, watching Panam's truck in the distance. "You indirectly confessed your desire to keep her close for years to come. Well done, Cypher. I am curious how Judy will react."

Cypher's head snapped to the old man. "You know the answer?"

"I have no intention of spoiling the fun. Let's go inside and work on the Gene-Optimized Crop."

Cypher sighed. Panam's car disappeared from the road ahead.

"Man, I hate drama."

"And I love it, Cyph."

####

The trick behind making the Gene-Optimised Crop was first passing it through cycles of sowing and harvesting while making genetic changes.

Cypher remembered the world of Interstellar, but his itch gave him a much deeper look at this crop, its history, and the reason why it existed. The Earth of Interstellar was hit by a plague called Blight. The Blight was made up of organisms that consume nitrogen for sustenance. And Earth's atmosphere being 80% nitrogen, it meant doom.

The more vegetation the Blight ate, the less breathable oxygen was left for humans and animals. The very reduction of oxygen meant extinction of plant life on Earth. The Blight finished one crop after another: trees, grass, resulting in massive dust storms. The origin of the Blight was never explained, however.

The Gene-Optimised Crop itch he had received belonged to corn, the last crop left on Earth in Interstellar. In time, even corn would have gone extinct, however. But the current Earth he lived in wasn't as bad as that of Interstellar.

Canada was still green. Many areas of the planet were green. America was ruined by crop and animal plagues, industries, exploitation, and war. The Middle East was ruined by nukes. Furthermore, farmers now mostly grew high-sugar wheat, the strain that was used to make CHOOH₂. This meant food that could feed bellies went to engines instead.

Cypher had already fixed the energy issue with nuclear reactors.

"Let's start with the plain template. We got corn seed samples from the Biotechnica raid." Cypher worked on the smaller Hydroponics Bay he had made before. The floor-wide Hydroponics Bay was still under construction.

Cypher planted a few seeds in rows and columns. Atlas, beside him, used Microbots and Servo-Skulls to alter each seed's chemistry and biology using a Replicator. It was the fastest and easiest way to change a seed's nature, as Atlas had the processing power to manually run the Replicator.

Even a single successful seed would allow them to print countless more. Entire bags of them, actually.

"Nope, the itch's still there," Cypher muttered as they made batch after batch.

The issue was that Cypher only knew the method. He didn't know the complete biological makeup of the seed. That meant even Atlas had to run billions and billions of simulations before each Replicator printing.

"Cyph, relying on the Replicator this early is inadvisable. It cannot account for the environment's natural conditions. We need a crop capable of growing with less oxygen. Let us begin in the Hydroponics Bay. Once I determine its exact biological makeup, I can bypass several stages through calculation and produce the final seed with the Replicator."

Cypher nodded right away. This itch didn't really have a full 'how to' blueprint. It just existed. It told him what to focus on. How to grow. How to breed plants.

Both of them worked on the small Hydroponics Bay for hours. It took a lot of time to grow a seed, but they didn't need it to grow fully.

As night approached, Cypher changed the 6th batch of seeds. The Hydroponics Bay was used to mimic the Blight's conditions. Most seeds died in it, but some would survive. The best ones, Cypher would cross-pollinate. But they were yet to find a credible 'low oxygen' crop.

But then 9 PM rolled around, and Cypher decided to call it a day.

"Gotta swing by the Afterlife. Told Rogue I'd meet her." He headed upstairs to his apartment and hopped in the shower. "Anything sketchy going on over there?"

[Rogue has closed the Afterlife for the night.]

"Ah, that's better."

After a shower, he changed into clean clothes and a new lab coat. The reason he preferred it was that it was long, loose, and he could use it like a bulletproof shield.

"Since I'm headed there tonight, I'll visit Vik and get those subdermals at last."

Cypher then walked back down and arrived at the factory floor that was connected to the nearby fashion factory outside with a tunnel. There, he hopped into a two-seater Spinner car. He flew it out through the tunnel, then the factory, and then towards the city.

His AV was fast. In a matter of minutes, he was flying above Santo Domingo, and in less than fifteen minutes, he was above City Center. This was the advantage of AV. Night City didn't seem that big anymore.

At last, he arrived at Little China and began lowering his car down to the parking lot of the Afterlife. Only Rogue's car was there, so he had ample space. Besides, the AV's automated parking system did the job just fine.

[Cypher, there has been an update. Arasaka has just issued summonses to several senior spec-ops operatives stationed outside Night City, recalling them. One is Valerie, twenty-three, a Charter Hill resident.]

The AV had parked itself, but Cypher didn't get out, taken aback by the news Atlas just dropped.

"Got a picture of her?"

[Yes, sending it to your brain.]

Cypher saw the image right away. There was that distinct hairstyle of a fade on the left side of her head, pink hair falling on the right side, covering her ear and cheek. A red and black sharp, flexible, form-fitting office suit, and black heels.

"Yeah, that's her. Keep her under extreme surveillance. Don't mess with her; just report back if Arasaka kicks her out sometime in the next few days."

[Understood.]

Cypher finally got out of the AV. Though in his mind, only thoughts about V were running. At last, he'd found the main point of focus of this city. But he'd changed so many things; he was unsure if anything would even happen.

[Thirty bodyguards, including Maine's crew, are standing around the building.]

"Great."

He walked downstairs to the club's entrance. It was clean now. Rogue was clearly trying to change things.

"Any idea what she wants from me?"

[She was recently in the Badlands, where she met an organic nomad. She willingly deactivated her chrome with a device during their meeting. The subject of their discussion is unknown. That nomad had arrived from outside Night City.]

"Guesses?"

[Someone high in the chain of command of a nomad nation is interested in you. Based on Rogue's former affiliation, the strongest probability is the head of the Aldecaldos.]

Cypher whistled and reached the main door of the club. As usual, the club's bouncer was standing there. But the man just gave him a nod and stepped aside, opening the door.

The club was empty that evening. But he didn't have to look for the host as he saw Rogue standing behind the bar's counter. He walked over to her and sat down on the round stool, smiling like a happy patron.

"Want a drink?" Rogue asked.

"Sure, gimme... vodka, chocolate milk, and a sprinkle of cinnamon."

"..."

In the end, Rogue shrugged and made the drink.

"You've gotta be using fake ingredients. The Continental's got the real stuff, real chocolate milk, tastes damn good." Cypher made small talk, glancing left and right. "So, am I about to get jumped here or something?"

"And risk getting stormed by your army of bodyguards outside?" Rogue scoffed, busy with the drink. "No. I wanted a talk. And to extend an invitation on someone's behalf. Heard you're hiring nomads in serious numbers. Panam's been spreading the word."

Cypher nodded strongly and received the drink. He took a sip first and exhaled with satisfaction. "Yeah, those AVs ain't gonna build themselves. And I'm gonna start farming on a serious scale soon. I'm getting sick of trash pizzas. I want some actual food."

"And how exactly are you planning to pull that off?" Rogue asked, clearly unconvinced.

"Pretty simple. You find a nice field, clear it out, plow it, then you harrow it, level it, sow the seed..."

"I didn't ask how it works. I'm asking what you'll grow. Those seeds belong to Biotechnica. They've got monopoly."

Cypher chuckled. "I know. I was just messing with you. Yeah, Biotechnica's got a monopoly, so what? I ain't using their seeds. I'm making my own gene-edited crops and growing them out in the Badlands."

"..."

Rogue let out a tired breath, poured herself a neat drink, and downed it in one go. "You're crazier than I figured. After pissing off a dozen corps, nearly bankrupting half of them and wiping billions off the board, you're going after the food industry?"

“Why not? Gotta start fixing America somewhere. Food and energy security are pretty damn high on that list,” Cypher replied, finishing his drink. He wiped his mouth, his grin vanishing in an instant as he turned serious. “And I’m only getting started. So, let’s not screw around with small talk. What do you want?”

“I want nothing. I’m just the messenger. An old friend of mine wants to see you. But he’s not in the Night City. You’ll have to make the trip to Arizona.”

Cypher scowled and got up. “Like hell I would. What kinda invitation is that? Is it Blackhand? That fucker was at my club, then just vanished.”

Rogue’s eyes reacted.

Cypher noticed that. He didn’t need Atlas to point it out.

“I thought it was about the club, but nah, it’s dumber than that. I’m too busy—”

“He’s dying. Won’t be around much longer,” Rogue continued. “If you want the backing of tens of thousands of Aldecaldos, you meet him.”

Cypher sighed, ready to leave. “Who is it? Santiago?”

Rogue frowned, but then nodded.

“I’ll think about it.”

With that, he turned around to leave in a rush. More pressing matters had come up, after all. Atlas was blasting him with instructions.

[...ETA 6 minutes. 5 armed AVs, 20 armored operatives fitted with explosives and advanced armor approaching from...]