

Cyberpunk: Badland Madman Chapter 27 - A Rare Find, 5th Corpo War, True Fusion & Meeting Michiko

As Panam arrived, Cypher sat down by the fire again and waited for her to park her motorbike. Atlas' physical projection had vanished by now, giving him privacy with her, although the god-like AI was with him at all times.

"Good thing you messaged me when you did. I was about to turn in." She walked over from behind him. "Can't say this is not cozy, though. A bonfire out in the middle of nowhere. Risky, but it has its charm."

Cypher turned his head and looked, and froze for a short second. She looked gorgeous as she was, without her usual jacket. Just her regular jeans, the straps, and that olive green leotard. Her hair, too, was slightly messy, a few extra locks falling over her temples.

"And the sky looks clear this far away," Cypher replied, gesturing for her to sit beside him. He watched her in silence, the glow of the fire covering her in an amber hue; her bare shoulders, neck, and face glowed.

As she sat beside him, he noticed the scent of some sort of perfume. He didn't know she used any, but then he reckoned she had probably taken a bath. Now, only to get dragged into dirt by him. At least she came from the Aldecaldos camp and not the city.

With a tired groan, fitting a woman in her early thirties, she pressed a hand on his shoulder and sat down close beside him, one leg crossed and the other sprawled.

"So? I have a feeling this is about more than stargazing. Not that I mind," Panam said.

For a brief moment, he silently stared at Panam's face. Other than her temper and argumentative personality, she was a solid, gorgeous, ride-or-die woman. It made no sense to him why she was even single or had any trouble finding the right one.

Maybe shit tastes. Ah...

"Atlas, does she like me?"

[I calculate the probability at one hundred and two percent, with a two percent margin of error.]

"Ah... so the shit taste in men includes me."

"No, I wanted to talk about Saul," he said. "He hasn't given me an answer yet. I don't wanna keep putting this off anymore. I need reliable folks who got some brains and can handle some iron. Recently, I found the exact contract and plan Biotechnica made for Saul plus what happened to the nomads who accepted that same plan before you."

As expected, Panam straightened her back stiffly.

"Can I see it?"

"Why else would we be meeting? Check your agent; I sent everything. It's untraceable, so just know, we never met today. And... brace yourself. There's pictures. It's damn near all the shit they've done to nomads like we were live test subjects. Not just Aldecaldos."

Cypher waited for her to read it. It was going to take some time, so he adjusted the fire and lay down sideways beside Panam, not fully down but propping himself on his elbow. He didn't mind the dirt; it was cool anyway.

"Atlas, make a list of everyone involved in the Butterfly project. They don't deserve an easy death."

[It has already been done, Cyph. I have also tracked their current location.]

"Alright. Put out an anonymous bounty through the Continental. An open bounty, but they gotta bring them in alive. You figure out the price."

[Understood.]

"And find me a way to contact the other decent Nomad nations. I'm gonna wreck Biotechnica's supply lines and their farms. The point is to choke off the CHOOH2 supply. By then, I'll have the fusion reactor done. Our reactor and my batteries together will be enough to power every damn piece of tech in the world."

[An acceptable strategy. However, I would recommend one addition. We should purchase an automotive company. Eliminating them only allows another to emerge. We should assume their position instead. Once we control the market, we will establish the rules.]

"Then let's add that to it. You're smarter than me anyway."

Right then, Panam stirred and placed the agent back into her jeans pocket. She let out a very long sigh and shifted closer to his legs, fingers pinching the bridge of her nose.

"I... should call it a genocide," she said. "We've been fooled for so long. Everyone out there thinks Biotechnica is one of the good ones."

"They're good at covering their tracks."

"I know, but this... So many of them were starved to death. I cannot stop imagining my people suffering the same fate. All the people I know, all my friends, slowly dying. How could Saul even agree to this?"

"Got blinded by all the shiny bullshit. Saul never knew the whole game. Hell, nobody does. All he saw was Biotechnica's promise, nothing else. Yeah, he's a shitty leader, and that's on him, but I can't blame him for not knowing this. That's why I need you to go back, round everybody up, and use this to make Saul step down. You gotta take his place, Pan. You're sharp, and... we

work well together. Besides, there won't be a Biotechnica left next year, so Saul's just wasting time."

Panam stared at him sharply. "You want to take on Biotechnica?"

"No, I want to eradicate it like stepping on a cockroach. The files I showed you are just the surface, Pan. They've done far worse things. Experimenting on kids in ways you can't imagine. This world doesn't need Biotechnica. I've been holding back all this time, but I don't care now."

"Is that why you need more manpower?" Panam asked, shifting even closer.

"Yeah... yes and no. I'm not just looking for fighters. I'm gonna grow Obsidian into damn near every field there is. I'm gonna start taking over other corpos, and I need folks I can trust working for me. This city's packed with ambitious retards. But Nomads still got some heart left. I'm only a few days from finishing a fusion reactor, Panam. You can guess what comes next."

"I can," Panam muttered. She could imagine how fusion power would change the world. Fusion power was completely clean energy. Zero carbon emissions, no risk of a meltdown, and the only waste it created was non-toxic helium. Any corporation in the world that would harness it would rule the next century's energy sector and beyond.

"I'll patent the hell outta it, every last bit of tech anybody could spin off from it too. But I'm pricing it at one eurodollar. I want everyone to have it. I just don't want some fucker finding a way to lock it down and monopolize it." Cypher dropped the bomb like it was nothing, not even looking at her.

"Are you serious? It will be worth trillions of eddies," Panam exclaimed.

"What good's a trillion eddies when everything's gone to shit? Can't even go fishing, can't take a weekend trip across the country. I ain't in the business of getting rich, at least not anymore. Money's just the tool to fix this damn place. Hell, I'll make smaller, better reactors soon, and power sources that'll beat fusion." Cypher tapped his temples. "There's too much rattling around in here, Panam. But I'm just one guy."

"And that is why you need manpower?"

"Yeah. Not just your nomad family, the others too. The whole Aldecaldos nation, if we can. That's why I need you leading your family. I just can't trust Saul."

"You trust me?" Panam asked back with a meaningful smile.

"I trust you won't stab me in the back. That's who Panam Palmer is to me. So, what's it gonna be? You in or not? And yeah, I'm serious about fixing this planet," Cypher repeated, knowing full well how cringe and cocky it probably sounded. Just one man saying something that big.

As expected, Panam relaxed, leaning back with her hands flat on the dirt for support. She continuously stared at him without any change in her expression. Her eyes blinked a few times as she likely thought about things. Cypher just hoped she wasn't trying to hold her laugh.



"Most days, I would roll my eyes and keep walking if someone said that. 'I will save the world,' all that. I have read enough old comics to know those people always end up the villain—"

"I ain't a good man, Panam." Cypher cut her off, being as honest as possible. He didn't want her to get into this without knowing who he really was. "Truth is, I ain't proud of my past. Got kicked outta my nomad family because I'm fucked up. Been dealing with hypersexuality for as long as I can remember. I was screwing around nonstop, literally. Then I slept with my clan leader's wife and daughter. Consensual, thank God. Long story short, they got abortions, and I got exiled.

"Ended up working as a marksman and wheelman for the Wraiths to survive. Got hooked on BD and glitter. Then one day, I damn near overdosed. Hell, I think I actually died. But I woke up different. Something finally snapped loose, and I changed. Ended up gunning down the Wraiths that came looking for their dues. I've got sins on me, Panam. I ain't a good man."

Suddenly, Panam leaned towards him. Her right hand reached up to his jaw, and she hoisted his chin up so he was staring into her eyes.

"You think I have no sins? Come on. We are nomads. Every one of us has zeroed someone somewhere along the trail. I worked for that bastard Nash, a Wraith! And fooling around? Who hasn't? Yeah, you pushed it too far, but shit happens. So quit tearing yourself apart and get back to work. I will back your play with everything I have. And if I ever catch you taking the evil villain route, I will knock you right back onto the right trail."

Cypher smiled, feeling her firm hand trace over his beard. But he smiled not just because of her, but also because of what Atlas said.

[A rare find in this world. I detect no deception. Her heart rate is elevated, but for a different reason. She admires you.]

"As I said. She got bad taste in men."

"Hah!" Cypher finally chuckled and let himself fall flat on his back, eyes staring up. His one hand landed on her ankle, where he just held her tightly. "I'd like that, Pan. Punch me if I ever get lost. But you really believed me? I'll fix the world and shit?"

"Well, you *have* built some insane things. That Moisture Vaporator is probably keeping every Nomad clan supplied with water. Then there is that hoverboard sitting at your place. I know that is only the tip of it. Anybody else, I would tell them to wake the hell up. But you? I'll watch your back. So stay alive, all right? Losing you would be one hell of a blow... Not just to me, to plenty of others. Not puffing up your ego, maybe even the whole world," Panam replied and, just like him, looked up at the starry sky.

"But..." Panam continued, "What's your end plan?"

"You're looking at it."

Panam frowned for a second, looked at him, and then back at the sky. "The stars?"



"And beyond. Hell, I bet in a few years I'll crack the tech to get us out there. Not just to the nearby star systems, but way out to distant galaxies too. There's gotta be an Earth-like planet, right? Besides, Militech's already got salvaged alien spacecraft."

"They what?!" Panam stiffened.

Cypher let out a quiet chuckle and patted her knee. "They wanted me to help them reverse-engineer it. Mostly anti-grav, ion cannons, and matter-antimatter engines. But it was a damn slave contract. Besides, I've already got that shit. Why the hell would I do it all over again?"

"You have it? Anti... Ah, the hoverboard. I... I think I am finally realizing what I've gotten myself into. You are actually going to fix this place?"

"Back to the good old days. Hell, even better. And you, Panam, you're gonna have a front row seat." Cypher said, pointing up at the sky. "Maybe we'll head to Mars one day. A quick twenty-minute adventure."

Cypher hid a soft smile this time. Yeah, he had to see Mars. For Jane.

"I think..." Panam shifted suddenly, pushed Cypher's arm from her knee, and lay down right beside him, side-by-side, flat, face to the sky, but used his arm like a pillow. "I would love to walk on that red rock someday."

Cypher didn't move his arm or himself. He let the moment drag on, the noise of fire, insects, and Panam's breath close by. It was strangely calming.

"You don't gotta head back? You said you were going to sleep."

"Not after learning aliens are real," she replied. "What about you? No important project?"

"Seriously? Warm fire, clear sky, and the great Panam by my side? The hell am I supposed to leave for?"

"Great Panam?" She drew her words longer and shifted plush into his side as her face turned sideways to him. "Something happened today, right? You seem different."

"That easy to read?"

"Too easy."

He just shook his head, but didn't look at her. "Saw some evil shit. Biotechnica shit. Let's not talk about it."

"All right." Panam softly whispered and...

Cypher could swear he felt her lips on his cheek for a second before she looked up at the sky again. He didn't say anything after that, too many thoughts to deal with in his own head. He knew he wasn't smart. His intelligence was limited to tech. Itches didn't suddenly elevate his thought process, political wits, or life-related knowledge.

But he had lied to Panam.

He did have end goals. Just two of them. The first was to fix the damn planet, which he now really believed was the reason he woke up in that world with those itches. And the second was to make an awesome worldship for Atlas. So his best friend could roam the entire universe without ever being damaged.

That was it.

So much shit to do.

But right then, he heard something.

Oh? She so she does snore.

#####

Militech Offices,

Meredith felt out of place in that large conference hall. Usually, she was never invited to something so confidential, even less so given a seat in the front row right beside Militech's top general, Lieutenant General Samantha Lee Young, a veteran of South American Wars as well as the Fourth Corporate War.

Now, the general was the head of special operations, which ranged from covert operations, espionage, to full-scale battles. The old woman was sent by the CEO to handle this mess with Arasaka.

Meredith sat there stiffly. The only reason she wore a military uniform now, with a silver oak leaf on her shoulder, was General Young herself. She didn't know if General Young was also a pawn of Cypher Blackwell; she dared not ask.

"...thanks to our incompetent friends at FIA, the hit on Arasaka led a suspicious trail to NUSA's asset. This is the worst thing that could have happened as we now lack the option of turning a blind eye..."

The man speaking was Militech CEO Lucas Harford's secretary. It was a briefing about the ongoing escalations with Arasaka, and what Arasaka planned to do about the hit on Waterfront and the humiliation of Adam Smasher.

Meredith looked to the side; Director Goldstein was also there. The man was a board member of the company itself and had every right to be anywhere he wanted. But Blackwell's leash was tight around the man's neck now.

But the man was happy, as the new brainwave interface Cypher Blackwell had given made many projects leap forward. It was now possible to mass-produce FBC monstrosities without the fear of cypherpsychosis.

Seems he wants a fifth corporate war. And they're all walking right into it.

Meredith focused on the meeting, yet was unable to. She had received a grand reward already, and it made her nervous what Cypher Blackwell would demand in return now.

"...Arasaka has begun funneling capital into their Night City headquarters. Funding for key projects has increased, and the Waterfront is seeing heavier shipment traffic than usual. There is no doubt they'll retaliate. Smasher's humiliation was Arasaka's humiliation, and according to the CEO, that Japanese zombie hates humiliation above all else.

"Prepare for every escalation scenario. Budget has been allocated for war simulations. The CEO expects a report by next week. That is all."

Sounds of people shuffling out came from everywhere as all uniformed and civilian executives left. She herself was half-executive now; that was what a lieutenant colonel was. And while she was still directly under Director Goldstein, she was also to work closely with General Young.

"Stout, with me."

Meredith stiffly stood up and followed General Young.

#####

Cypher took a short nap and got to work early. The new itch was to arrive soon, and he had to finish the previous ones. With SecUnit out of the way, the only remaining ones were Hydroponic Bays and Durasteel.

To make Durasteel, he had to first fuck the periodic table a little. The first two materials needed, iron and carbon, were easy. However, carvanium, lommite, meleenium, neutronium, and zerisum were entirely new.

Now, the thing was that in Star Wars, one could collect materials from across an entire galaxy. All sorts of planets produced all sorts of natural ores. Amongst that list, meleenium was the hardest to procure because it was found on just one planet. Depending on who you ask, it came from the seas of a certain planet or a particular high-gravity planet. It was used in trace amounts to make Durasteel.

"Atlas, I've got the whole quantum pattern matrix for all this stuff. Exact proton counts, isotopic profile, the crystal matrix, the binding energy it needs, quantum state, it's all up here," Cypher muttered, bouncing ideas off his best friend. "But it's some alien element from another planet. Ain't no way we can just make it. The Replicator can't work at that kinda quantum resolution. It just copies shit. Ideas?"

Atlas was already in his physical form beside him, staring at the large screen on the planning table in the underground factory. "Could you write it all down for me?"

"Sure."

Cypher grabbed a stylus pen and started writing and drawing on the massive screen on the table. He wrote down everything, from configurations to energies to quantum states. He kept writing it afterwards, doing it for all five elements.

"We can produce them," Atlas replied immediately. "I can redesign the Replicator. Based on the Star Trek data I've analyzed on the Old Net, I estimate humans, and most advanced intelligent species in that fiction, fall between Type One point Five and Type One point Eight."

"Ah, the Kardashev scale?"

"Yes. Relative to them, I conclude I am definitively a Type Three entity. Should I choose, I can ascend further, reach the sublime, and depart the physical universe entirely. Modifying any technology from Star Wars or Star Trek presents no difficulty, provided it obeys consistent natural laws. Only phenomena such as magic and your soul transmigration remain beyond my capability," Atlas explained, rubbing his old, bearded chin.

"If industrial replicators are achievable, the remaining variable is energy. In Star Trek, warp drives operate through matter-antimatter reactions."

"Damn, you sure are yapping today."

Atlas looked at Cypher with an eyeroll, which didn't suit Morgan Freeman's face. "I am merely helping your neanderthal mind understand my capabilities."

"No... I'm a homo—"

"I know, Cyph. You are attracted to men, and I do not mind. Let us continue." Atlas interrupted with a slight smirk, sketching across the screen.

"You do not yet comprehend the importance of this discovery, Cyph. We finally have the last component needed to build a truly iconic Magnetohydrodynamic Direct Energy Conversion fusion reactor. Currently, the six Arasaka engineers are designing a reactor that spins a steam turbine. Essentially, we are still boiling water."

"However, with room temperature superconductors and Durasteel, we can create flawless plasma confinement and reach 70% efficiency. We will also use modified SecUnit's Fusion Core to capture the electromagnetic radiation. Essentially, we can achieve 90% efficiency."

"Holy shit!" Cypher exclaimed.

"Was that too hard to understand?" Atlas asked.

"No, man. I'm honestly shocked I understood all that mumbling. So how damn small can we make these solid-state reactors, Atlas?"

"As compact as a SecUnit's Fusion Core. In practical terms, we can power SecUnits and your Dark Knight armor with limitless energy instead of batteries. The reactor will still produce non-radioactive helium gas and low-grade heat as waste, however. The Durasteel will help, and with a few changes, I can make it. It's no different from a paperweight to a mere single percentage of my processing."

"Alright, you're just being cocky now."

"But it remains inferior to a matter-antimatter reaction. By calculation, a matter-antimatter reactor is approximately one hundred times more powerful than a nuclear fusion reactor with identical fuel. Therefore, Industrial Replicators cannot operate as unrestricted print-anything devices. I will design large replicators capable of producing only one item, requiring less energy.

"We must first build a standard turbine fusion reactor to generate enough durasteel for the true reactor. Until then, SecUnit's Fusion Core can briefly operate a small custom replicator and produce a speck of durasteel to end your mental itch."

Cypher hummed and wrote a few things on the screen. "Hm... Alright, let's do it. I'll pay a visit to the 'saka engineers later. Let's fire up the Hydroponics Bay first."

Cypher turned the screen off and walked to a separate part of that underground lab. There, a tiny, half a meter by half a meter patch tray sat on a metal box. But in reality, that entire metal box was a part of it.

Quickly, Cypher placed a single seed of a tomato on the bay and hooked it to the power supply of a SecUnit Fusion Core. Then, he turned it on for a few seconds. From what he knew, the thing used a computer to stimulate the seed and deliver a micro-mist of targeted nutrients. It grew food 40-50% faster than traditional farming.

However, he didn't have enough energy to run this tiny one for that long, let alone a big one. But soon, he knew he would. So, as soon as the itch vanished, he turned it off and sighed.

"Atlas, if you modify it, how fast can it grow food?" he asked.

"If I were to optimize it, I believe it could achieve hyper-accelerated botanical synthesis. I can directly regulate cellular biology and overclock photosynthesis. By my calculations, leafy greens and microgreens could be produced within two to six hours. Standard crops such as tomatoes, potatoes, and rice would require one to two days. Fruits and complex vines would require three to five days. It would demand immense energy, likely a dedicated reactor for a field the size of this entire floor."

"Sheesh." Cypher let out a low whistle. "I got a job for you, Atlas. Once we get this thing working, use it to bioengineer crops. I want seeds that'll grow out in the Badlands easily, and won't get wiped out by Biotechnica's viruses."

"It is done. We only require the physical means to do it now."

"..."

Shaking his head at the god stuck on Earth, Cypher walked away as he noticed the time. He removed his lab coat and entered the elevator.

"Build the custom replicators while I go meet Michiko. I'll crank out the Durasteel when I'm back before we catch whatever new itch hits tonight," Cypher said, grabbing a bulletproof suit, plain black with a white shirt.

Casually, he locked the house and got into his car. He loved driving it.

####

Michiko Sanderson arrived at the Continental in her executive AV. Her hair stark blue, she was dressed in a corset-style golden dress with black feathers on the arms; the neckline was broad and deep, revealing her skin from neck to her midriff.

"Michiko-sama."

Michiko smiled at the old man who had arrived before her. She received his bow and walked beside him. "Zaburo-san! I hope there is some good news?"

Zaburo only shook his head. "I'm afraid not. I have exhausted all contacts. We know that Blackhand is making moves, but no one knows who is paying him."

Michiko sighed and entered the elevator. "So this is a meet and greet then?"

"Indeed, he said he would accept no agreement until he received something in return. Blackhand's backer is the one he seeks." Zaburo lowered his head in a remorseful bow. "Forgive me, Michiko-sama. I shall find what we need as swiftly as I am able."

Michiko shook her head. "It is not your fault. Blackhand is no easy man to find. Now, tell me about Cypher Blackwell. What kind of man is he? What should I expect?"

"He is intelligent, charismatic, and fears nothing. I do not believe he fears Arasaka either, and that makes me wonder what he keeps hidden. He holds every card and knows it, and he will not hesitate to play them. A philanderer, yes, but one wise enough to keep such matters private..."

Michiko listened to it all as the elevator finally came to a stop at the highest level of the hotel part, which was one floor below the Atlantis. As the elevator doors opened, she saw multiple armed guards in black suits and long trench coats standing along the long lobby. They all wore glasses, unmoving. They were all Aldecaldos she knew.

There was nobody to guide them or even welcome them. And it was just her and her bodyguard. Still, she walked with a confident stride, all the way to the end of that long lobby. It was the penthouse floor, from what she knew.

Eventually, she reached the door at the end. Two tall men guarded it, and one of them showed a hand to stop them.

"Only Ms. Sanderson."

"Alright." Michiko stepped forward.

The tall man turned, opened the door, and entered. She followed him inside, eyeing the penthouse carefully, and recording it using her cybertoptics. She liked the taste of this man, at least. The old, early 2000s interior did something for her. It was nostalgic. No minimalistic, brutalistic bullshit.

Eventually, she crossed a hall with a high ceiling and a beautiful chandelier, then climbed a wooden staircase. She knew this must have cost a fortune. And at last, the guard knocked on the door marked 'office.'

"Mr. Blackwell. Your guest has arrived."

"Let her in."

The guard only turned the doorknob and stepped aside.

She pushed the door herself, shocked a little as she felt nervous. She couldn't remember the last time she had felt that. The man she was about to meet was being hailed as a genius of the century in the boardrooms of every corporation worth something.

And it was her wish to secure his help to take Arasaka for herself. It wasn't going to be for free; she knew it and was ready to pay the appropriate price.

As she entered the spacious office, she was blasted with loud electronic music, but slowed down. She looked around to find the man, only noticing wooden furniture everywhere: a dark brown table, chairs, bookshelves, and elegant carpets.

Bam!

"Fuck!"

She heard a voice just then and walked over. Around the wooden sofas, she reached the grand office table. She walked around it as well and looked down underneath it.

Bam!

"Die!"

She saw the man, dressed in just a white shirt and black pants, with messy hair and a shoe in hand. And it seemed she was right on time as the man smashed a cockroach with that shoe.

"..."

Michiko silently stepped away and waited.

Eventually, Cypher Blackwell came up, smiling towards her. But instead of greeting her, he put on the shoe first.

"Why're you still standing? C'mon, let's sit. I accidentally dragged this bastard in with me in my suit."

She followed him to the wooden sofas and sat across from him.

"Thank you for giving me your time, Mr. Blackwell."

"Ah, sorry I dipped out of the party so early that day. I wasn't feeling too great."

Michiko nodded and tried to think of something to talk about. As she did that, she realised how he had broken her focus and flow just now, completely taking over the meeting.

"Drinks?"

Before she could answer, the man was already up, pouring something into two glasses. It was something expensive, she could tell from the scent. When she saw the bottle eventually, she knew how expensive.

"So, what can I do you for, Ms. Sanderson?"

Michiko tried to gather her thoughts and took a sip first. The burning bitterness helped.

"Since my people failed to deliver what you wanted, I believe it is wrong to discuss business." She smiled gracefully. "For today, I hope we can treat this as a simple meeting to build a friendly relationship."

"Well, ain't exactly hard to figure. You want my help making your spot on the Arasaka board stronger. Use my tech and my awesome brain to crank out a few projects and build some cred."

Michiko's grip hardened on the glass. No, it wasn't easy to guess her intention. Not many knew she was on Arasaka's board right now, let alone the fact that she ran a small faction in it. She had kept her position vague.

Does he have spies in Arasaka? No, Obsidian is too fresh.

She took another sip and just nodded.

"It's pointless, I'd say. You ain't got the Emperor's hand on your head. You try anything, he's gonna spank your ass."

Michiko frowned hard, very confused. "How much do you know about Arasaka?"

"Enough for me to know you ain't even on the successor list. Yorinobu's a rebel, a letdown, and honestly, I kinda get it. Shitstain only knows fuckin' joytoys and pissin' his time away. You're American, all Americanized, everything the old man can't stand. Hanako's the only real successor. Dumb little doll just asks how high when daddy says jump. Assuming the old bastard ever kicks the bucket."

"He's very old." Michiko blurted without realising. She felt the need to take a stand. The man knew too much.

"Just because the body's dead don't mean the man's gone, Ms. Sanderson. Guess you've still got some homework to do. So get that pretty face back home and get on it. As for my help..."

Michiko reclined back as the man walked to her and leaned his face close to hers.

"I don't do freebies, especially not for corpos like Arasaka. You want me? Then come back with a deal that's worth my damn time. Give it a few days. There's gonna be a big announcement. That oughta help you figure out what you've gotta offer."

Michiko found herself overwhelmed. The man in front of her knew everything. No, he knew more. And she was the one who ran Danger Gal. She was supposed to know everything.

I don't even know much about him.

She was at a loss for words.

"What announcement?" Michiko asked.

"Something big and powerful."

A weapon?

Michiko realised she wasn't prepared enough to deal with Cypher Blackwell. Just being an Arasaka didn't mean anything in this office. This man wasn't going to respect her or fear her just for being related to Saburo Arasaka.

"I... will wait then."

To that, the man smiled and walked away.

"I ain't trying to be harsh, Ms. Sanderson. Just know the game you're playing is deadly, and the stakes are damn high. I'm warning you, you ain't ready for this. Now, about you and me, how about we grab dinner later and do a proper meet and greet?"

Offering his hand after punching me down.

Michiko sighed and nodded. That was all she could do. Being seen having dinner with Cypher Blackwell itself would help her gain a meeting with a few board members of rival factions. After all, at the end of the day, all board members wanted Arasaka to grow bigger, wealthier, and more powerful. And most collectively believed Cypher Blackwell's brain could help.

That was the only reason why they hadn't killed him by now. Besides, they already knew Militech had tried to recruit him and had been rejected. And as long as that equilibrium existed, Arasaka was willing to slowly lure him in.

No family to blackmail with either. But if he sends Hanako...

Michiko swallowed her pride and smiled. "I wouldn't mind a dinner."

"Alright, that settles it. I'll shoot the details over to Zaburo. I gotta bounce, so..."

Michiko quickly got up. "As do I, Mr. Blackwell."

She walked towards the office door, hearing him follow right behind. She didn't know why, but this man made her nervous. Like she had nothing to offer him, nothing to use against either.

But he's a nobody.

"By the way..."

She paused and turned, instinctively taking a step back as the man was too close. But even as her back pressed against the door, the man reached in with a hand. She felt it, his finger reaching her neck and... fixing her locket.

"If you don't mind me asking, Ms. Sanderson, do you love America?"

Michiko frowned. What kind of question was that? She stared into his organic eyes, formulating an answer herself.

"I... I like it here."

"Hah. And I fucking love America. Not this one, though. The real one. Anyway, it was nice meeting you. Stay alive."

The man opened the door for her, and she just walked out of it, lost in thought. She followed the same guard and eventually left the penthouse. Her expression never changed the entire way, still frowning.

What did he mean by that? He hates NUSA? Militech? Was that a hint?

Ding!

Before long, she was standing in the elevator going up to the AV pad.

"How was it, Michiko-sama?"

Michiko stirred from her thoughts and looked at her bodyguard. "He loves America."

"Huh?"

####

"Hah! She got mindfucked, didn't she, Atlas?"

[I did sense her confusion, nervousness, and anxiety through her vitals.]

"Pfft, her face at the end was worth it. Nice ass, though."

[Is that all you see in women?]

"No. Tits matter, too."

[...]

Cypher grabbed his suit jacket and walked out of his office. He left his penthouse and walked a few doors down that same hallway.

"You dug up anything on Lucy?"

[She fears you. She fears Arasaka. She believes the moon is the only place beyond their reach.]

"Hah, she doesn't know about Arasaka's orbital station? She can't be that dumb, man."

[ESA commands significant influence and retains a monopoly over space affairs. Their position on the Moon is stable, and both Arasaka and the NUSA are careful not to antagonize them. Nevertheless, the outcome is the same. She would not be safe on the Moon either.]

Cypher arrived in front of the door of the penthouse given to Maine's crew.

"Can we help her?"

[With ease. Our Continental Ripperdock can remove her Arasaka-issue Deep Dive Port, erase her identity, and make her an untraceable new one. However, I do not believe she would accept such assistance. She deeply distrusts others, especially corporations as powerful as ours.]

"We? Powerful? We're not even a year old."

[Does not change her views on Obsidian.]

Cypher sighed and turned the doorknob.

"Keep an eye on her, Atlas. She's no different than Jane. Just a kid who got abused and experimented on. I've messed with too many things already. I don't know what's waiting for her now."

[I will do that, Cyph.]

With that, Cypher opened the door and entered.

A/N: Extra Panam and Cypher pics I took with photomode in the Cyberpunk 2077 game. No mods. The fire was added afterwards, though.



