

Chapter 12:

– John Welles –

I took another bite of prime rib and nearly had tears come to my eyes.

It was real.

Real meat. Not synth-beef pressed into the approximate shape of something that had once possessed muscle fibers. Not flavored protein paste. Not a lab-grown slab held together by edible adhesive and false hope. This had come from an actual animal. I could taste the fat melting across my tongue, the charred crust seasoned with salt and cracked pepper, and the rich juices that spilled from the tender center with every bite.

After nearly a week of Night City's synthetic food, it was practically a religious experience.

I closed my eyes and chewed slowly, savoring every second of it.

Five hundred eddies.

That was roughly what this dinner would cost by the time we were finished. Possibly more, depending on how expensive the wine V had ordered was. I hadn't dared look too closely at the bottle.

Thank God I wasn't paying.

Granted, there was something slightly emasculating about V paying for my meal. She had been the one to invite me out, select the restaurant, make the reservation, arrange transportation, and apparently decide that I deserved to experience a cut of meat worth more than some people in Heywood earned in a month.

She was, in every practical sense, taking me out.

That thought made me shift uncomfortably in my chair.

"I hate to admit it, but this corpo bitch is doing an excellent job of buttering you up."

Cortana sounded as grudging as someone acknowledging the tactical competence of a hated enemy. **"And it's working."**

I sighed internally. *This isn't a date. V and I are only here as friends.*

Cortana released a long, theatrical sigh directly into my mind.

"Keep telling yourself that, John. Repetition won't make it true, but perhaps you'll eventually find the delusion comforting."

She agreed it was as friends.

“Yes. And then she selected an expensive waterfront restaurant, put on a dress designed to interfere with your higher cognitive functions, ordered you real meat, and spent the last twenty minutes staring at you like she intends to eat you for dessert.”

I opened my eyes and looked across the table.

That was a mistake.

V was sitting opposite me in a beautiful black dress that contrasted wonderfully with her flawless tanned skin. It was the kind of perfect skin someone could only obtain after spending thousands of eddies at exclusive body clinics—smooth, immaculate, and entirely untouched by blemishes, scars, or the ordinary indignities of being human.

The dress hugged her figure closely, particularly around her perky breasts, with a neckline cut low enough to show their tempting upper curves without crossing the line into outright indecency.

It came dangerously close, though.

Her long black hair shone beneath the restaurant’s soft golden lighting as it fell down her back. Even sitting perfectly still, she looked polished enough to belong in an advertisement. Her glowing red eyes only sharpened the effect, making her seem beautiful, sophisticated, and just slightly inhuman.

The eyes of a predator wearing a gorgeous woman’s face.

V caught me looking.

Instead of calling me out, she smiled.

“How’s the food?” she asked. “This place has some of the best in Night City. Great food, beautiful view, intimate ambiance...” Her smile widened. “It’s a great spot for a date.”

I inhaled a piece of prime rib.

I coughed violently, grabbing my water before I embarrassed myself by dying in the middle of the restaurant. V watched with a mixture of amusement and concern as I swallowed several times and tried to recover what little dignity I still possessed.

“I thought,” I began hoarsely, “this wasn’t supposed to be—”

V’s smile stopped me.

It wasn’t one of her smug smiles or the calculated expression she wore when she knew she had cornered someone. It was soft. Almost hopeful.

I knew exactly what I should say. I should remind her that we had agreed this was only dinner between friends. I had already gone on a date with Lucy. Lucy had kissed me. She had made it abundantly clear that she wanted to see me again, and had reinforced that point with a photograph I was trying very hard not to remember while sitting across from another beautiful woman.

There was also Cortana, who was currently occupying my brain and monitoring the entire situation with all the cheerful restraint of a jealous military AI overseeing her sworn enemy.

My romantic life had become impossibly complicated before I had even technically acquired a girlfriend.

Still, looking at V's smile, I couldn't bring myself to ruin the moment. "This is really nice," I said. "Thank you."

Her expression brightened. "You're so cute when you get flustered."

"I'm not flustered."

"You nearly died because I called this a date."

"I swallowed wrong."

"Of course you did."

Heat spread across my face. V noticed immediately, resting her chin lightly on one hand as she studied me. "You're much more innocent than Jackie," she said.

"I'm not sure Jackie should be the standard for anything."

V laughed. "That's fair. Jackie's idea of flirting used to be flexing at women until one of them noticed."

"That sounds like him."

"It occasionally worked, which only encouraged him." Her laughter faded into another warm smile. "But you're different. You try to be polite. You worry about what people think, and every time I compliment you, you look like your brain needs to reboot."

"An accurate diagnosis."

I ignored Cortana. "I can handle compliments," I said.

"You can't even handle eye contact."

I looked directly into V's glowing red eyes. She held my gaze, slowly running one finger around the rim of her wineglass.

I lasted approximately three seconds before glancing down at my plate.

V laughed softly. "See?"

"That doesn't prove anything."

"It proves exactly what I said." She leaned forward slightly, and the neckline of her dress became even more dangerous. "I find it cute, John. You're sweet. Honest. A little awkward." Her eyes moved over my face. "You haven't learned to hide everything behind chrome and attitude yet."

The teasing in her voice had softened into something sincere.

"I've spent a long time waiting to meet a man like you."

My fork stopped halfway to my mouth.

V didn't look away.

Neither did I.

For once, Cortana had no immediate sarcastic remark. I could still feel her inside our shared mind, however—silent, alert, and radiating enough jealousy to qualify as a measurable source of heat.

V lifted her glass and took a slow sip, apparently satisfied that she had rendered me incapable of speech.

– Lucy Kushinada –

"All right, everyone, listen up," Maine said over the encrypted call connecting the entire crew. "This is a high-paying gig, and Faraday says if we pull it off clean, there should be more work waiting for us afterward."

"Then we're fucking golden," Rebecca declared. "This is gonna be a cakewalk. We spy on some corpo bitch while she eats dinner, send Faraday the proof, collect our eddies, and go drink until Pilar starts looking handsome."

"Couldn't afford enough alcohol for that," Dorio said.

"Fuck both of you," Pilar complained.

Lucy exchanged a glance with Kiwi.

Her mentor's face was mostly concealed behind her mask, but Lucy had spent enough time around her to recognize the slight narrowing of her eyes. Kiwi didn't like this job either.

It was too easy.

The payout Faraday had offered was enough for a far more dangerous operation than simple surveillance. They weren't being asked to steal anything, abduct anyone, breach an Arasaka subnet, or even plant a tracking device. All they had to do was follow an Arasaka employee, determine who she met, and record anything incriminating.

That sounded almost insultingly simple.

Nobody offers that much money for simple work.

And any gig originating from Arasaka was bound to have something rotten buried beneath the polished surface. The corporation didn't hire outside mercenaries because it lacked manpower. Arasaka had private armies, elite netrunners, intelligence analysts, assassins, spies, and enough surveillance infrastructure to track nearly anyone in Night City.

So why hire Maine's crew?

Lucy didn't have an answer yet, but the cold tension in her stomach told her they wouldn't like it when they found out.

Carmello's occupied the top floor of a narrow corporate tower overlooking the waterfront. Everything below it consisted of bland little offices occupied by accountants, consultants, investment firms, and other people whose jobs Lucy couldn't explain without using the words fraud or parasite.

Most of the offices had closed for the night.

That had made getting inside almost embarrassingly easy.

Lucy and Kiwi had slipped into a small investment office directly beneath the restaurant. The place was dark except for the glow of computer terminals, city lights filtering through tinted windows, and the blue flicker from the equipment they had connected to the local network.

Both women were jacked in.

From their borrowed office, they had access to Carmello's security cameras, microphones, building controls, reservations, and internal staff communications.

The restaurant's security was expensive but sloppy. Whoever had configured the system had placed several floors of the building on the same network and apparently assumed the ICE protecting the main access point would be enough to discourage intrusion.

It hadn't been.

Lucy and Kiwi had entered through an old environmental-control node in the office downstairs, moved laterally across the building's subnet, and taken ownership of the restaurant's camera feeds without triggering a single alarm.

Kiwi had called it amateur work.

Lucy thought that was generous.

Maine, Dorio, and Falco waited outside in the getaway van. Falco was keeping the engine running and monitoring traffic, while Maine and Dorio were armed heavily enough to storm the restaurant if the surveillance job went bad.

Rebecca and Pilar were inside the office with Lucy and Kiwi, supposedly providing physical security.

Mostly, they were bickering.

"You stepped on my foot," Pilar complained.

"Shouldn't have put it under mine."

"I was standing here first."

"Sounds like a skill issue."

"It's a foot, you tiny psycho."

"Call me tiny again and I'll cut yours off."

Lucy did her best to ignore them.

She cycled between the restaurant's cameras, checking booths, tables, private dining rooms, entrances, elevators, kitchens, and service corridors. Carmello's was busy but not crowded. Most of its customers were wealthy enough to afford privacy and important enough to expect it.

Corporate executives sat beneath warm lighting while eating real meat and drinking alcohol that cost more than some families made in a year. Waiters moved silently between the tables. Soft music played beneath the murmur of conversation, carefully calibrated to create the illusion of intimacy without preventing surveillance.

Lucy switched to another camera. Then she froze.

V.

She recognized the woman immediately from the profile Faraday had given them. Long black hair, tanned skin, red cyberoptics. Their target was seated at a table beside the windows.

Sitting across from her was **John Welles**.

For several seconds, Lucy couldn't process what she was seeing. John looked good. Really good. He wore the new black jacket she had complimented on their date, with a clean white shirt beneath it. His sandy blond hair was still slightly messy, and even through the security feed, Lucy could see the nervousness in his posture.

V looked stunning. The corpo woman wore a tight black dress that displayed entirely too much of her breasts. Her hair shone beneath the restaurant lighting, and her flawless skin practically announced how many thousands of eddies she had spent perfecting it.

She was leaning toward John. Smiling at him. Not a polite smile. Not a professional smile. A soft, hungry, unmistakably interested smile.

Something sharp twisted inside Lucy's chest. Was John on a date with another woman? They hadn't agreed to be exclusive. They had only gone out once. Lucy knew that. She understood the technicalities perfectly.

They had still kissed.

John had held her like she mattered. He had looked at her as if she were something precious instead of a weapon Arasaka had broken and discarded. He had saved her life without expecting anything in return.

She had told him she wanted to take this seriously. Apparently he had interpreted that differently than she had.

"Lucy?" Maine's voice came through the call. "What's wrong? You found the target?"

Lucy opened her mouth, but no words came out.

Kiwi leaned toward her terminal, looked at the feed, and answered for her.

"Lucy's **input** is having dinner with our target."

Silence filled the channel.

"...Fucking really?" Maine grumbled.

Dorio sighed. "Then the gig's already dead."

"What?" Pilar asked. "Why?"

"Because you don't take gigs against people you know," Dorio said. "That's merc work basics. Lucy's new, but she's still part of this crew. We don't spy on her input for Arasaka."

Lucy glanced at Dorio's indicator on the call, surprised by the immediate certainty in her voice.

Maine gave a frustrated growl. "Faraday is going to bitch."

"Faraday's always bitching," Dorio replied.

Rebecca hurried to the terminal and shoved her face beside Lucy's, staring at the camera feed.

"What the fuck is John doing?" she demanded. "He's a pure and innocent gonk. I know he's got the romantic survival instincts of roadkill, but I didn't think he was the cheating type."

"He isn't my boyfriend," Lucy said automatically.

Rebecca looked at her.

Lucy glared back. "Shut up."

"I didn't say anything."

"You were about to."

"Yeah, but I hadn't yet."

Lucy suddenly remembered her messages.

She pulled them open so quickly that her interface briefly stuttered. There was an unread text from John, sent before they had entered the building.

John: Hey. Just letting you know I'm going out to dinner tonight with Jackie's friend, V. She's the scary Arasaka Counterintel agent I told you about. The one that wanted you dead but I convinced her otherwise. She and I are just going out as friends... Call me later, I wanted to tell you all about the gig I went on with Rebecca too!

Lucy stared at the message. Then read it again. Then a third time.

It was so cute that Lucy almost hated him for it.

Relief swept through Lucy so hard that she nearly sagged against the desk. He hadn't hidden where he was going, who he was meeting, or what they would be doing. He had assumed Lucy would see the message and understand. The tone was playful, but the information was entirely honest.

That was so painfully John that she wanted to kiss him again.

"He messaged me," Lucy said.

Rebecca immediately tried to look at the text. Lucy closed it before she could.

"He said he was having dinner with Jackie's friend."

“So he’s not cheating?”

“We’re not—” Lucy stopped, took a breath, and tried again. “No. He isn’t.”

Relief didn’t erase what Lucy was seeing on the camera.

John might sincerely believe this was a friendly dinner.

V absolutely did not. The way the corpo woman had dressed made that obvious enough, but the expression on her face confirmed it. V was staring at John with longing so naked that it almost made Lucy feel embarrassed for her.

Mostly, it made Lucy want to introduce the woman’s perfect skin to several meters of monowire.

Lucy zoomed the camera in.

John was blushing. V looked delighted.

“Corpo bitch,” Lucy muttered.

“Hey, that’s my line,” Rebecca said.

Then the rest of John’s message registered. *Scary Arasaka Counterintel agent.*

Lucy’s relief vanished. Cold realization spread through her.

Lucy’s heart began pounding. “Oh, fuck.”

Kiwi turned toward her. “What?”

Lucy pulled herself out of the restaurant feed so fast that the borrowed terminal flashed with warning notices. “Oh, fuck. Fuck!”

“Lucy?” Maine said. “Talk to me.”

“We just accepted a gig against an **Arasaka Counterintel agent**,” Lucy said.

“So what?” Pilar replied. “A corpo is a corpo, who cares what their job is!?”

Lucy wanted to smack Pilar for how dumb that statement was. Thankfully Rebecca stood on her tip toes and smacked the gonk first!

“This is a trap!” Lucy declared.

The room went silent.

Kiwi's posture changed beside Lucy. Her mentor straightened, one hand moving toward the cable connected at her wrist as she began reviewing their access route and building security. "What kind of trap?" Kiwi asked.

"The kind where we all die..."

"Specifics!" Maine ordered.

Lucy forced herself to think through the panic.

"Arasaka Counterintel would never hire outside contractors to spy on one of its own agents. They have internal surveillance teams. They have netrunners, facial-recognition systems, financial tracking, vehicle telemetry, and PRIVATE STRIKE TEAMS. They don't need Faraday, and they definitely don't need us!"

Kiwi had begun searching the building network for anything they had missed. "She's right."

Lucy continued, speaking faster as the shape of the operation became clear. "If they think V has gone rogue, they won't want an official arrest. Not if she knows enough to embarrass the division. They'll kill her somewhere private, then control the evidence."

Dorio swore quietly over the call.

"They know she's here," Lucy said. "They know we're watching her. There's probably an Arasaka death squad on the way to this building right now."

"To kill the target?" Falco asked.

"To kill **everyone**," Lucy answered. "V, whoever she's meeting, and us. Then our bodies will be the only evidence anyone finds. We'll have weapons, surveillance equipment, and a contract tying us to the target. Arasaka blames the dead mercenaries for killing their rogue agent, closes the investigation, and nobody looks any deeper!"

Nobody spoke for a moment.

Lucy could hear Maine breathing over the call. Then he exploded. "Goddammit! That four-eyed bastard knew what this was. Faraday fed us into a fucking Arasaka cleanup operation!"

"Maine—" Dorio began.

"No. We're done. Falco, get the van ready. Kiwi, Lucy, wipe everything and disconnect. Rebecca, Pilar, move your asses. We leave right fucking now."

Lucy looked back at the camera feed.

John was still sitting across from V, unaware of the danger closing around him. He smiled at something she said, his face open and trusting.

“We’re not leaving without John,” Lucy said.

Rebecca spoke at exactly the same time. “We’re not leaving without John!”

They glanced at each other. For once, neither argued.

“Absolutely not,” Maine snapped. “We go into that restaurant, we walk straight into the hit.”

“He’s in danger,” Lucy said.

“So are all of us!”

“John isn’t part of this. He doesn’t know what V dragged him into.”

“That’s why we grab him,” Rebecca declared, checking her pistols. “Quick extraction. In, out, shoot anyone in a suit.”

“Do not start shooting random people in suits,” Kiwi said.

“Fine. I’ll wait until they shoot first.”

“That wasn’t permission.”

Lucy disconnected from the restaurant cameras and pulled the cable from her wrist. Her hands were already moving toward her equipment.

John had warned her when Arasaka came looking for her.

He had risked himself to save her life when he barely knew her.

There was no chance in hell she was abandoning him now.

– John Welles –

The waiter stopped beside our table just as I finished the last piece of prime rib.

“Would either of you care for dessert?”

“Yes!” I answered immediately.

V raised one perfectly shaped eyebrow.

I cleared my throat and tried to reclaim some dignity. “I mean, I’d like to see the menu.”

The waiter’s professional expression did not change as he transferred the dessert options into our table display. Carmello’s offered real chocolate cake, crème brûlée, fruit imported from some

climate-controlled Biotechnica greenhouse, and several kinds of ice cream made from actual milk.

Actual milk.

I didn't know when I would get another opportunity to eat real cake and ice cream. My normal budget had me eating Mama Welles' cooking when I was lucky and protein shaped like food when I wasn't. I had already accepted that V was paying five hundred eddies for dinner. Adding dessert couldn't make the situation much more emasculating.

Probably.

"I'll have the chocolate cake," I said. "And vanilla ice cream."

"Excellent choice, sir."

V ordered the crème brûlée, and the waiter disappeared toward the kitchen.

"You're adorable," she said.

"I like cake."

"You looked more excited about that menu than you did about me."

"That isn't true." It was only after saying it that I noticed the trap.

V leaned forward, resting her chin on one hand. "So I excite you more than real chocolate cake?"

"I didn't say that either."

"But you just—"

Something warm brushed the outside of my calf beneath the table.

I stopped.

V had slipped one foot out of her heel at some point. Her bare toes traced slowly upward along my leg, teasing me through the fabric of my pants.

I stared across the table at her.

She took a perfectly innocent sip of wine. Her foot moved higher. "Is something wrong, John?" she asked.

I gave her the most accusatory glare I could manage.

It probably wasn't very intimidating, but V's beautiful face lit up as if I had just given her a present. Her glowing red eyes shimmered with amusement, and a playful smile curved across her lips. "I don't know what you mean," she said. Her foot dragged slowly back down my leg.

"You know exactly what you're doing."

"Do I?"

"Yes."

"Then why don't you tell me?"

Heat flooded my face. V's smile widened.

"This is absolutely a date," Cortana mumbled.

It is dinner between friends.

"Friends commonly remove their shoes and stroke each other beneath expensive restaurant tables?"

V likes teasing me.

"She certainly does. I wonder what your Lucy will think when she finds out."

That question punched through my embarrassment.

I had told Lucy I was having dinner with V, but I had also said it was only as friends. Lucy hadn't answered yet. She was supposed to be busy with Maine's crew, so she might not have even seen the message. What would she think if she could see V's dress? Or V's bare foot moving up my leg? Maybe I needed to establish clearer boundaries.

Definitely. I was going to do that any second now...

V suddenly went rigid. Her foot dropped away from my leg. The wineglass slipped from her hand and struck the table, spilling red wine across the white cloth.

At first, I thought she had experienced some kind of muscle spasm. Then I saw her face. The playful warmth had vanished. Her red eyes widened, their glow flickering erratically as her hands clutched the edge of the table.

She tried to inhale. Nothing happened. "I can't..." V rasped. "I can't breathe."

"V?"

She dragged in a thin, broken gasp. Her shoulders trembled as she fought for air, but every breath seemed weaker than the last.

People at the nearby tables began looking toward us.

V's eyes flashed once. Then their red glow dimmed almost completely. "Oh, fuck," she whispered.

"What's happening?"

"My cyberware." Panic stripped away every trace of her usual composure. "It all just shut down!" Her body sagged against the table.

"Everything?" I asked.

V gave the smallest possible nod. Her lips were already losing color. "Jenkins," she gasped. "Fucking Jenkins betrayed me first." She sounded shocked. Not because she had believed Jenkins was trustworthy. She had probably never trusted him a day in her life. But V had expected to see his betrayal coming. She had expected time to prepare, plan, and strike before he did. Instead, her boss had remotely disabled every piece of corporate cyberware in her body while she was sitting across from me. Including, apparently, something she needed to breathe.

"V!" I shoved my chair back and scrambled around the table. It nearly overturned behind me, but I barely noticed. V was collapsing sideways, and I caught her before she could fall from her seat.

Her body felt frighteningly limp. I had no idea what to do.

How much of V was cybernetic? Her optics obviously were, but those weren't killing her. Did she have replaced lungs? An artificial heart? Some kind of circulatory implant? A synthetic diaphragm? Even if her organs were still organic, shutting down years of integrated cyberware at once could be sending her nervous system into catastrophic shock.

I might have been holding her while she died.

"Fuck." Cortana's voice cut through my panic. **"This bitch is going to owe me so much for this. Jack into her, John. Right now."**

I didn't hesitate. My personal link snapped free from my left wrist. I found the port at the back of V's neck, aligned the connector with shaking fingers, and slotted it in.

The connection hit me like a wave of static.

Data flooded across my Kiroshis faster than I could understand it: diagnostic notices, failed implant handshakes, corporate authentication warnings, medical alarms, and layer after layer of hostile red encryption.

V made a weak sound in my arms.

Then Cortana entered her system. There was no wireless interference, distance, or network bottleneck now. The personal link gave Cortana direct, unfiltered access to V's body and every piece of cyberware integrated into it.

My vision filled with rapidly changing code.

“Oh, this is insulting.”

Can you help her?

“Arasaka calls this security?” Cortana scoffed. **“I broke stronger encryption while operating aboard obsolete UNSC vessels. Their systems are centuries ahead of this.”**

Less commentary, more saving V!

“I can multitask.”

The hostile code surrounding V's cyberware began disappearing.

Cortana didn't politely bypass Arasaka's ICE. She tore through it. Corporate authentication keys shattered, implant locks vanished, and shutdown commands were overwritten faster than the system could generate new warnings.

One by one, the dead implants inside V came back online.

OPTICAL SYSTEM: ACTIVE.

NEURAL REGULATOR: ACTIVE.

CARDIOVASCULAR SUPPORT: ACTIVE.

RESPIRATORY ASSISTANCE: ACTIVE.

ENDOCRINE CONTROL: ACTIVE.

Cortana wasn't merely restoring them. She was severing each implant's connection to Arasaka as she went, rewriting ownership permissions and burning out the remote-access paths Jenkins had used. **“There. Her cyberware belongs to her now. What an innovative concept.”**

V's entire body jerked in my arms. She dragged in a deep, desperate breath. Then another. Her red eyes flared back to life as her lungs began working properly. Color slowly returned to her face, and her trembling hands clutched at my jacket.

I stared at her for several seconds, afraid the shutdown would happen again.

“It won’t,” Cortana assured me. **“I disconnected every implant from Arasaka’s networks and replaced the corporate control architecture. Her evil counter intel boss can’t reach her through those systems anymore.”**

I released a shaky breath and retracted my personal link.

V looked up at me. The fear in her eyes slowly became understanding. Then astonishment. “You saved me,” she whispered. Her gaze moved over my face as if she were seeing me for the first time.

“I saved her, thank you very much,” Cortana grumbled.

“I didn’t do it alone,” I said softly.

V didn’t ask what I meant. She grabbed the front of my jacket, pulled me down, and slammed her lips against mine.

My brain stopped working.

The kiss was passionate, desperate, and overflowing with gratitude. V kissed me like someone who had been moments from death and needed proof that she was still alive. Her lips moved hungrily against mine before her tongue slipped into my mouth.

I made a startled sound. That only encouraged her.

One of V’s arms wrapped around my neck, holding me close as her tongue moved against mine. I could taste wine on her lips and feel the rapid beat of her newly stabilized heart against my chest.

“I regret everything!” Cortana hissed. **“Turn her cyberware back off, evil Corpo overlords!”**

You don’t mean that.

“I absolutely do! I save her life, and this slutty Corpo immediately attacks your mouth!”

V tightened her grip on me. Despite the shocked part of my mind screaming this was a terrible idea, my body responded before my common sense could intervene. I kissed V back.

Her breath caught. The kiss became hotter.

“John!”

Someone called my name from behind me. Not Cortana. An actual voice.

V and I broke apart. She made a soft, dissatisfied sound and pouted when I pulled away, her arms still looped around my neck.

I turned my head.

Lucy Kushinada stood several feet away. Her eyes were wide, and a fierce blush colored her pale cheeks as she stared at V and me tangled together beside the table. Shock, hurt, confusion, and anger flashed across her face too quickly for me to separate any of them.

Rebecca stood beside her.

Unlike Lucy, she didn't look shocked in the slightest. She gave me a wink and wore the biggest, most delighted smirk I had ever seen.

My dessert still hadn't arrived.

I stared at Lucy, completely unable to think of anything I could say that might make the situation look less terrible.

Why was she here? She had said she was busy with Maine's crew tonight. Had she followed me? Had Rebecca convinced her to spy on my dinner with V?

More importantly, how much had Lucy seen?

Maybe she had only arrived at the end. Maybe from her angle, it had looked like V was giving me emergency mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. That explanation would require Lucy to be blind, but miracles happened.

"She saw the entire kiss, John." Cortana's merciless voice destroyed that fragile hope.

You don't know that.

"I reviewed the restaurant cameras. She entered twelve seconds before calling your name. She watched you make out with V for eleven of those seconds."

Why were you reviewing the cameras?

"Because I am surrounded by predatory women and apparently must document attacks on my partner's virtue."

Lucy stared at me. I waited for her to yell. Maybe she would call me a cheating asshole, draw her monowire, or simply turn around and disappear from my life. Instead, she closed her eyes and took a slow, steady breath. When she opened them again, her expression had become frighteningly controlled. "John," she said, stepping closer, "we have to go. Right now." Before I could ask why, her gaze snapped toward V. "And you." Lucy's eyes narrowed. "Stay away from my input, you dumb corpo bitch."

"Ha!" Rebecca pumped one fist into the air. "I knew he was your input!"

I gaped at Lucy.

Input? I knew enough Night City slang to understand what she had just called me. An input wasn't merely someone Lucy had kissed once in a Kabuki alley. The word meant boyfriend, lover, or male partner, depending on the relationship.

Lucy had just claimed me as hers in front of V, Rebecca, and half of Carmello's. "You called me your input," I said intelligently.

A faint blush returned to Lucy's cheeks. "This isn't the time."

V took another deep breath as the last of her cyberware stabilized. She was still leaning against me, though at this point I suspected that had less to do with physical weakness and more to do with irritating Lucy.

V slowly licked the lingering taste of our kiss from her lips. The motion was blatantly obscene. She winked at me, then turned a hostile glare on Lucy. "So you're the picksocket he saved."

"Former picksocket," I said automatically.

Neither woman acknowledged me.

V straightened, one arm still resting possessively around my shoulders. "I hate to break it to you, but I've already decided I'm going to be John's output."

My thoughts crashed into one another. *Output?* Girlfriend. Female partner. *Lover*.

V smiled as if she had just announced a hostile corporate acquisition. "I already liked him," she continued. "Then he went and saved my life. You might as well give up now."

Lucy's expression became dangerously blank. "Oh, you bitch."

"Street thief!"

"Corpo whore!"

"Picksocket!"

"Arasaka lapdog!"

Lucy stepped forward. "Maybe I should cut that stupid smile off your perfect face."

"Try it."

"Could both of you stop?" I asked.

They continued glaring at each other as if I hadn't spoken.

"No, no. Let them fight," Cortana said. **"With luck, they'll eliminate each other!"**

I looked desperately toward Rebecca. She was watching the argument with a delighted grin, her eyes moving between Lucy and V like a spectator at a championship boxing match.

"What is happening?" I asked.

"This is better than television," Rebecca said. "Lucy claimed you, V counterclaimed you, and now they're probably going to fight over who gets mating rights."

"I don't think that's how relationships work."

"Who cares? This version's funnier." Rebecca's grin suddenly disappeared. "Oh, yeah. We're also pretty sure an Arasaka death squad is on its way to kill all of us, so we should probably bail."

"WHAT?" My voice came out much louder than intended.

Even Lucy and V stopped arguing.

"Death squad?" V asked.

Rebecca nodded. "Faraday hired us to spy on you. Lucy figured out that was probably because whoever hired Faraday wanted a bunch of dead mercs lying around to blame after you got zeroed."

V's expression hardened. "Jenkins..."

I looked between them, struggling to catch up. "You were hired to spy on V?"

"Not important right now," Lucy said.

"It feels important."

"Less important than the death squad!"

Rebecca's eyes suddenly glowed as an incoming call connected through her optics. She tilted her head, listening to Maine through the crew's private channel. Then all amusement vanished from her face. "Maine's outside," she said. "He can see an AV coming in."

A deep mechanical rumble passed over the roof. The glasses on our table vibrated.

Rebecca looked upward. "He says it just landed on the roof."

V moved instantly. "GET AWAY FROM THE WINDOWS."

The windows on the far side of the restaurant exploded inward!

Glass tore through the dining room in a glittering wave. People screamed as tables, food, and expensive bottles shattered beneath the impact.

Rebecca grabbed the front of my jacket before I could react. She yanked me down while kicking the base of our table, flipping it onto its side between us and the broken windows. I hit the carpet hard enough to knock the air from my lungs, landing behind the thick tabletop as shards of glass sliced through the space where I had been standing.

Lucy dove behind the overturned table beside me.

V dropped into cover on my other side. Whatever weakness remained from her cyberware failure disappeared beneath years of Counterintel training. Her expression became cold and focused as she pulled a compact pistol from a concealed holster beneath her dress.

Of course she had brought a gun to dinner.

Multiple black cables dropped past the shattered windows. Men rappelled through the openings one after another. They wore featureless black tactical armor, helmets with reinforced faceplates, and expensive combat cyberware. Assault rifles were already braced against their shoulders before their boots touched the floor.

No insignias. No unit markings. Nothing identifying them as Arasaka. That somehow made it more obvious that they were.

The waiter who had taken our dessert order stood frozen near the kitchen entrance. His immaculate uniform was dusted with glass, and he was clutching a tray against his chest. "What is the meaning of this?" he demanded. "This is a private establishment. You cannot—"

One of the soldiers turned and fired.

The waiter's head disappeared in a burst of blood and bone. His body dropped beside the dessert cart.

For half a second, the entire restaurant seemed to freeze.

I stared at the corpse. The man had just asked if I wanted cake. Now he didn't have a face.

"Fuck," Lucy whispered.

V's curse was quieter and far more vicious.

Then everyone began screaming! The restaurant's wealthy patrons surged from their tables in blind panic. Chairs overturned. Glass shattered beneath expensive shoes. Men and women shoved one another toward the exits, all dignity vanishing beneath the primal need to escape.

"REMAIN WHERE YOU ARE!" one of the black-armored soldiers ordered.

Nobody listened.

The death squad opened fire. Their rifles hammered through the restaurant. A man in an expensive silver suit spun and collapsed as bullets tore through his back. A woman running beside him fell a moment later, her body sliding across the polished floor.

They were killing everyone. Not only V. Not only Maine's crew. Every customer, waiter, bartender, and kitchen worker who could become a witness was being systematically erased.

My body locked up as people died around us.

The gunfire was deafening. My Kiroshis outlined moving targets, but there were too many civilians between us and the soldiers. Every flash of a rifle produced another scream or another body.

"John!" Cortana's voice struck through my shock. **"Stay down. Your subdermal armor will not stop sustained rifle fire."**

A burst of bullets slammed into our overturned table.

The tabletop jerked beneath the impacts. Wood and synthetic composite sprayed across my face as rounds began chewing through our cover.

Rebecca unslung her Carnage shotgun and laughed, though there was nothing amused in the sound. "Finally," she growled. "Something I can fucking shoot."

Lucy's monowire spool lit along her wrist.

V checked her weapon and glanced toward the kitchen. "The service corridor leads to the elevators and emergency stairs," she said. "If Jenkins sent a full cleanup team, they'll have both covered."

"They'll have the lobby too," Lucy replied.

"And the roof," Rebecca added. "Big fucking AV sitting on it."

Another burst tore into the table. This time, one round punched completely through and passed inches above my shoulder.

V grabbed my collar and pulled me lower. "We need another way out!"

I looked at the dead waiter, the panicking diners, and the black-armored men advancing through the restaurant.

Then my vision changed.

Cortana seized control of the building data flooding through my cyberdeck. A three-dimensional layout appeared across my Kiroshis: walls, service ducts, electrical conduits, maintenance shafts, elevators, and emergency systems.

Red markers spread across the map as she identified hostile signals.

“I’m working on it,” Cortana said. “**But first, we need to survive the next thirty seconds...**”

XXX