

Chapter 131 - Not People

My eyes were still glued to the distant silhouette of the Wall, looming like some ancient monument to paranoia, when Cryo veered us off the freeway and started guiding the car down into the deeper guts of the city.

The Wall vanished behind a tangle of concrete and steel—skyscrapers packed shoulder to shoulder, apartment stacks that got crumblier and crumblier the further we went down, and interlocked layers of walkways and platforms that webbed overhead like a steel canopy.

The deeper we went, the darker and more grimy it got, with the smog shifting back from the thin film of the higher-level highways to a thick curtain, clinging to the streets like it had nowhere better to be.

Five minutes later, we dipped off the highway entirely and eased into the narrower roads of a sub-level that looked a hell of a lot more like the sort of place people *disappeared* in.

Right on cue, Cryo finally broke the silence with that signature gravel-drag of a voice.

“We ‘bout to hit Section Three, then we’ll cut into Vinyard Ave. ETA’s five, so get yer asses ready.”

I straightened up in my seat automatically, the nerves in my gut kicking back into high gear.

“Plan’s same as before,” Cryo went on, eyes still locked on the road. “Mouse, ya get us in, make sure there ain’t nothin’ waitin’ on the other side we ain’t prepped for, and keep tabs on whoever bails. Pina, yer up front. Knock polite first, but if they don’t get the hint—”

He paused as we rolled past a massive blast-style bulkhead gate with glowing red neon spelling out **SECTION THREE** across the top, like the city wanted to make damn sure you knew *exactly* where you were about to die.

“—Ela’s with me. We back Pina up if shit gets dicey.”

I gave a small nod, even if no one saw it.

Cryo didn’t miss a beat. “Job’s simple. Clear the damn buildin’. If they walk, great—I tell the client, they send their people, and we get paid. If not? Then they die where they stand. Don’t bother bein’ nice. We ain’t paid to babysit, and we ain’t responsible for cleanup. That’s on the client.”

“You sure know how to make a girl feel special,” Pina drawled, grinning like a kid handed a flamethrower. She practically bounced in her seat, clearly way too ready for the possibility of bloodshed and the promise of not having to worry one bit about cleanup duty after the fact.

Meanwhile, I was quietly wrestling with my own nerves, trying to keep my heartbeat from thumping its way out of my chest.

*'First-ever job and straight into scav eviction, huh...?' I thought, silently urging the passive effect of Ego to soothe the edges of my anxiety. 'I got the RaZ, my RI-05s, my stab- and bullet-resistant outfit from Misha... I'm way overgeared for bottom-feeding scavs. Just breathe easy, let the team handle anything serious, and **don't** fucking panic.'*

I'd done everything humanly possible to prepare for this exact moment.

Gear, mental prep, contingency plans—there was no logical reason left to be nervous.

But logic rarely had anything to do with nerves, did it?

Trying to distract myself from the spiral of thoughts, I shifted my attention to the world outside the tinted windows, taking in the Thirteenth Layer in all its grim splendor.

To say it looked depressing would've been one hell of an understatement, though.

Layer Thirteen didn't even *look* like part of a city anymore—it looked like the place cities went to die and rot.

There wasn't a single speck of sunlight down here—not even the faded, piss-yellow glow from the smog layer above.

Just the desperate sputter of old lamp posts flickering like they were trying to die with dignity, half-broken advertisements spasming out glitchy neon slogans, and the occasional hum of light leaking from apartment windows that somehow still had power.

Every beam of illumination looked like it was losing a war against the dark, swallowed up by the perpetual twilight that blanketed everything in a kind of grey that made you feel like the rain was coming—except it never did.

The world just sat there, heavy and stagnant, like it had forgotten how to move forward.

Decay clung to absolutely everything in sight.

Walls stained with mildew and soot. Grime-caked concrete peeling from overpass columns. Half-collapsed balconies wrapped in plastic tarps and rusted rebar. Apartment after apartment with windows either boarded up or smashed in, sometimes both.

Stores that had long since given up pretending to be open were now hollowed-out husks, their interiors piled with trash and old tech, probably stripped bare years ago. Some had makeshift graffiti warning others away. Others had old corporate logos still glowing faintly, flickering like ghosts that hadn't realized the dream of a technological utopia was long dead.

We rolled past alleys packed with mounds of garbage that had more structural integrity than some of the actual buildings around here.

Patchwork shelters were jammed between dumpsters, cobbled together from scavenged metal sheets and whatever fabric people could find. And every so often, I caught the glint of eyes watching us from the shadows—silent, unblinking.

'Paranoia with skin on,' that's what this place was.

It was pure, distilled dystopia—noir-cyberpunk in its rawest, ugliest form.

The kind of place where hope wasn't just absent—it was downright *offensive*.

And seeing it through a screen had done absolutely nothing to prepare me for the real thing.

Feeling the *weight* of it, seeing how many people actually *lived* in this... it twisted something in my chest. A cold shiver ran down my spine and settled somewhere *deep*.

Not fear, exactly. Not yet. Just the dawning horror of realization.

'This is actual real life for people... Not a level, not a backdrop for a story quest... Real life.'

It had definitely yanked my thoughts away from all the nervous energy buzzing in my chest earlier—but I wasn't entirely convinced that trading that anxiety for good old-fashioned existential dread was actually an upgrade.

Sympathetic terror hit differently when it was just *there*, smeared across every crumbling wall and broken window like the city was daring me to try and feel hopeful.

Thankfully, Cryo cut the car down another narrow road, pulling us away from the soul-crushing residential blocks and into what looked like a more industrial stretch of the district.

The scenery changed fast—no more looming apartment buildings or half-squatted shopfronts, just blocky warehouses, fenced-off lots, and long-abandoned factories standing around like rusted-out tombstones.

Most of them looked like they hadn't been working in decades, aside from the graffiti and whatever stripped parts the locals hadn't already scavenged.

A grimy metal sign flickered past my window, barely lit by a half-broken lamp: *VINYARD AVE*.

'Right. Focus time.'

As if reading my mind, Cryo's voice rumbled through the car again. "We're almost there. Pina, get yerself ready—I ain't lookin' to be surprised soon as we step out. Ela, yer with her. Make sure the area's clear before Mouse starts settin' up."

I gave a quick nod—more for myself than anyone else—and leaned down to grab my pack from the floor. The familiar weight settled into my lap as I popped it open and did a fast mental checklist.

'Drone? Secured. MOD-IK? Secured. Good, good.'

I slung it halfway over my shoulder and let it sit snug against my back.

The DuraPack Misha sold me wasn't just for hauling junk. I'd paid extra to get one that could actually *tank* a hit if things went sideways, and I damn well intended to use it for more than just storage.

It was a piece of gear now—like the rest of my kit.

After that, I reached behind me and drew the RaZ from its sheath in one smooth motion. Still felt sharp, still clean. But I wasn't one to leave things up to "probably."

Not today.

[Sharpen]

A faint pulse ran through the weapon—not visible to anyone without the right eyes, but I could feel it. Like static through my bones.

No cost, no cooldown, just a free maintenance boost on demand.

Still, I made damn sure no one was looking when I did it.

The recent revelation from the session with Miss K about flashy System abilities lighting up like neon signs for the wrong people was still fresh in my brain. I doubted Cryo, Mouse or Pina had Anima-sight running by default—or even access to it, really—but I wasn't about to test that theory over something this basic.

'No reason to risk what's easy to keep quiet,' I reminded myself, slipping the blade back into its sheath and letting the motion ground me.

"That's the place," Cryo muttered, jerking his head toward a squat, tired-looking structure that we were slowly rolling up on. Looked like an old warehouse—brick bones, wrapped in half-rusted plasteel sheeting that had definitely seen better decades. The kind of building that'd been forgotten by the world, only to be remembered by the wrong kind of people.

I barely had time to get a good look at it before the System chimed in out of nowhere.

[Task Accepted: **Cryo's Scav Cleanup**]

[Description: *Clear the designated building from all hostiles and wait for the client's crew. 0/1 Building's handed over. Time Limit: **23:59:59.***]

[Reward: 250 Character Experience + 1 Random Reward (Uncommon Table)]

My eyebrows nearly hit the roof.

'Huh?!' I blinked at the notification. *'Not complaining, sure—but really? **Now?**'*

I would've expected the Task to pop up back at the Valedictorian, when Cryo first laid the whole thing out. That would've made way more sense. But this? We were practically at the doorstep and only *now* did the System decide it was time to make things official?

And more than that—there hadn't been a confirmation prompt. No "Accept or Decline" like with Mr. Stirling's or Mr. Shori's jobs. It had just given me the Task as already accepted right away.

'Why the hell didn't I get a choice this time?'

I leaned back slightly, letting the pieces tumble around in my head.

The biggest difference I could think of?

With Stirling and Shori, I had genuinely considered walking away at first. Mr. Shori's had seemed like a damn trap and Mr. Stirling's had been something I had practically been forced into by Valeria.

The System had dangled those Tasks in front of me like bait, trying to get me to bite.

But this time? This job? I'd already committed the second I walked into the Valedictorian.

'So... the System didn't need to tempt me. It just handed the Task over because it already knew I was all in.'

The thought left a weird taste in my mouth.

'Is that how it works now? The System just decides for me, based on what I do?'

I didn't really like that.

But I didn't have time to dwell on it either, as Cryo stopped the car in the alley right next to the warehouse itself, and Pina immediately opened the door and jumped out of the car.

Shaking myself off to get my head back into the game, I quickly opened the door and jumped out as well, pulling my RaZ immediately and holding it close and ready in combat position, before letting my eyes roam around the area, scanning for any threats.

Pina, meanwhile, had pulled out a nasty looking heavy revolver and was similarly scanning the area.

She moved with confidence, her boots crunching over scattered gravel and trash as she swept the alley on the opposite side of the car with sharp, practiced movements.

I mirrored her steps on my side of the car, RaZ held low but ready, my gaze darting from shadow to shadow. There were plenty of them—dumpsters, half-collapsed scaffolding, old crates stacked against the walls like makeshift barricades—but nothing moved. No sounds beyond the distant hum of the city and the soft whir of Cryo's engine ticking as it cooled.

Pina gave a sharp gesture toward a nearby blind spot as she rotated back around my side, and I peeled off slightly to check it.

Just an old stairwell entrance, rusted shut, plastered with long-dead ads and city-code citations. I tilted my head, listened for anything—movement, whispers, clicks.

Still nothing.

“Clear,” I muttered under my breath.

“Same on the other side,” Pina said, then stepped back toward the car and thumped the rear door with her boot. Three sharp kicks—loud enough to echo down the alley but not loud enough to draw attention from outside it.

A second later, Cryo stepped out like a goddamn specter.

No wasted movement, no hesitation.

His gun was in his hand before the door even clicked shut. Something sleek, military-grade, and blacker than the space between stars.

He scanned the area again, same as we had—no theatrics, just slow, deliberate sweeps of his eyes, his whole body tense like a coiled spring ready to snap.

Satisfied, he gave a short grunt. “We’re good. Mouse?”

“Yeah, yeah, gimme a sec...” Mouse was already halfway out the car, muttering to himself as he squatted near the alleyway wall closest to the warehouse.

His head twitched back and forth like a bird, eyes flicking along the surface.

“The file said there might be a port... somewhere ‘round... here...” he trailed off, pressing his palm flat to one of the grimy metal panels and then pulling it back, snapping his fingers like he’d just remembered something. “Ah—old industrial model. Of course, of course... They always like to hide them behind signage or breaker boxes. Classic... Classic...”

He drifted farther from the car, and the rest of us naturally spread out around him—Cryo on one side, Pina on the other, me trailing just far enough back to keep an eye on the perimeter without crowding him.

It ended up looking like a rough triangle, our movements in sync without needing to speak.

Mouse poked and prodded at every damn surface he could get his hands on—signage, breaker boxes, rusted-out cable clusters, loose panels hanging on by a thread.

He muttered the whole time, voice low and sharp with irritation.

“*‘Easy to find,’* it said... like fuck it is... *‘Simple access point, should be right there’*—where? On the opposite side of the Silver fucking Veil?! *‘Nearby alley, impossible to miss’*—yeah, if you got a damn Cellzora, maybe...”

It went on like that for a few minutes while my nerves slowly started to settle.

The nervousness and adrenaline hadn’t faded—if anything, they were still riding high in my bloodstream—but it had shifted into something more manageable.

And then, finally, Mouse let out a victorious, “Aha! Found you, ya little shit!”

He crouched by a wall and yanked a jagged slab of corroded metal clean off with both hands, revealing a recessed access port coated in grime and some kind of sticky residue I didn't want to think too hard about.

He turned around and grinned at us like a kid who'd just discovered hidden candy.

"One moment," he said, before reaching up and yanking the direct-connect from the base of his skull.

With a practiced flick, he slotted the cable into the port and jacked in.

I felt the itch to ask if I could patch in alongside him—the MOD-IK practically humming in my bag—but I forced it down. This wasn't the time to learn more about real-world Netrunning.

This wasn't a sandbox sim or one of my usual dives into virtual architecture with Kill Joy.

This was real-world, boots-on-the-ground work. The wrong distraction at the wrong time could get someone killed—or worse, considering that we were literally dealing with Scavs.

The alley stayed dead quiet for the next few minutes—nothing but the occasional creak of weight shifting between me, Cryo, or Pina, and the odd snap or groan from rusted metal finally losing a years-long standoff with gravity.

Every sound felt sharper than it should've in the silence, like even the alley itself was holding its breath.

Mouse, meanwhile, looked like he'd been body-jacked by a nervous system on fast-forward.

His eyes flicked side to side under twitching lids, darting around like he was chasing a swarm of invisible gnats. It almost reminded me of what he had looked like when I hit him with [Venombite]—minus the smoke, spasms, and audible screaming, anyway.

So... not that similar, I guessed. Still weird to watch.

Then, just as suddenly as it had started, he snapped out of it.

His body jerked once like a puppet getting its strings pulled back into place.

"We're in the clear," he said, voice calm but clipped as he pulled his direct-connection from the jack. "Nobody watching the place. Bunch of blank Scavs sitting around, playing vidgames. One's blasting music on a busted radio, real low quality shit. No cams though, so I couldn't eyeball their loadouts. But far as I can tell, the client's info checks out. I sealed the back door tight—only way out now is through the front."

I blinked at him, surprised at how cleanly he delivered all that. Crisp, organized, professional.

From *Mouse*.

But Cryo and Pina didn't even flinch—they probably expected it. Apparently, Mouse on-the-job was a whole different beast from the scattered chaos-goblin I'd seen before.

Or maybe my [Venombite] had shaken something loose back into place in *just* the right way.

Cryo gave a short nod, no real praise, just a signal to move.

We peeled off from the access point and headed toward the main road—Pina in front, me on her heels, Mouse following, Cryo watching our backs.

The alley spit us out just a few seconds later, after we made sure no one had eyes on us.

The road was quiet, too. No signs of movement, and definitely nothing coming from the warehouse we were about to hit.

Didn't take long to reach the front.

The building loomed like an old-world beast—brick bones, plasteel skin, rust and grime like war paint.

"Mouse, get hidin'," Cryo muttered, barely above a whisper. Mouse nodded once, then ducked behind a pile of broken shipping crates, pistol drawn but low.

Cryo turned to me and Pina, his voice low and firm. "Pina, yer up. Ela, follow our lead. Kill 'em if they look twitchy. No second chances. No fuckups."

I answered with a solid nod, gripping my RaZ a little tighter as I slid into place by the doorframe. Pina mirrored me on the opposite side, calm and loose—downright giddy, even—heavy revolver dangling casually at her side.

Cryo settled a meter back, ready to back us up if this thing turned bloody fast.

'Alright, Sera... deep breath. Focus. They're Scavs. You know what they do. They don't count as people, not anymore. This is just cleanup. A means to an end. Operator License. Step one. They are not people, just Scavs.'

I repeated that last bit like a mantra—cold, detached, mechanical. It helped. Sort of.

Pina flicked her eyes between Cryo and me. We nodded. She stepped forward with all the confidence in the world, as if she wasn't standing in front of a building full of potential killers.

Then she knocked—once with her metal fist, then again.

"Delivery service! Your order's here!" she called out, voice slipping into a thick, almost sultry accent that didn't belong in a hellhole like this. She even added a wink toward the door, like she was playacting for a stage audience.

The confidence, the flair—it was *ridiculous* and completely out of nowhere.

We heard the telltale scramble of movement inside—someone knocking over something, maybe tripping, followed by a tangle of half-shouted voices.

"Huh? Delivery? Did somebody order shit?"

“Nuh-uh! I ain’t orderin’ no nothin’!”

“Is it pizza?” another voice chimed in, casual as hell, like this was a totally normal day.

“Jiral, did you order fuckin’ pizza without tellin’ anyone?!” the first one snapped.

“What? No! But I *would* kill for a slice right now. I’m starving, honestly,” the third voice added, like they weren’t squatting in a random warehouse.

Pina let out a visible sigh, her fingers tapping once against the grip of her revolver. Then she leaned in and knocked again—twice this time, metal ringing sharp against the door.

“Deliveeerrrrry!” she sang out, voice climbing into a teasing pitch that felt wildly out of place in this cesspit. “A dozen piping hot pizzas, just as ordered!”

There was a beat of silence—and then, right on cue:

“She sounds hot.”

“Yeah. And that knock? Definitely cybernetic,” one of them added, trying to whisper but failing completely. The warehouse walls were barely holding themselves up—sound carried like it was made of holes.

A third voice piped in, this one with a dark little twist to it: “We could rip her...? Pizza and chrome. That’s a jackpot, right?”

“And she *sounds* hot. We can keep her, no? We only got one console. Need somethin’ new to play with.” The second voice again—this time quieter, *hungrier*.

The wrong kind of hungry.

My hand clenched tighter around the RaZ’s grip as their words oozed through the door like sewage.

Footsteps started approaching—slow, casual, like they thought this was going to be an easy game.

‘They’re not people,’ I reminded myself, heartbeat kicking up a notch again. *‘They’re Scavs. Filth. Predators who’ve already made their choice. They don’t get a second chance. They don’t deserve one.’*

The steps got louder.

Closer.

Almost there...