

Chapter 14:

– John Welles –

The city fell away beneath us in layers. I watched through the AV's armored window until it vanished behind the skyline.

Only then did I let my head fall back against the seat.

That turned out to be a mistake.

Pain immediately stabbed through my ribs, wrapped around my side, and crawled up beneath my shoulder blade. I hissed and jerked forward again, one arm folding protectively across my chest.

Lucy's hand tightened around mine. "You okay?"

"Yeah," I said automatically.

Three women looked at me.

Lucy's expression went flat.

Rebecca snorted.

V, sitting across from us with blood streaked across her black dress, gave me the kind of exhausted glare normally reserved for particularly stupid children.

I reconsidered my answer. "No," I admitted. "But I'm probably not dying."

"An inspiring medical assessment." Cortana appeared, visible only to me. Her blue holographic body stood with her arms folded beneath her chest, translucent light moving across her skin in slow waves. Her expression suggested she was debating whether it would be medically beneficial to reach out of my optics and slap me. **"Remain still. I'm running another diagnostic."**

I tried to relax. That was difficult when every muscle in my body had apparently joined a union and gone on strike.

The stolen Arasaka AV flew west under autopilot control, skimming beneath the normal civilian air lanes. Its transponder still identified us as an automated trauma-response vehicle returning from an emergency call. Cortana had manufactured the credentials while we were climbing away from the restaurant, and so far none of the patrol vehicles we passed had challenged us.

So far. I had learned to hate those two words.

The cabin was big enough to carry a full tactical squad. Armored seats lined both walls, complete with harnesses, weapons brackets, medical compartments, and more ominous storage panels than I wanted to open without supervision. The interior still smelled like gun oil, scorched electronics, blood, and the expensive synthetic leather Arasaka apparently believed made murder more professional.

Rebecca had claimed one of the seats opposite me, though “claimed” implied she was sitting in it normally. She was lying sideways across three of them, boots braced against the wall, her Carnage resting over her stomach as she watched the city shrink behind us. Her clothes were torn, her face was streaked with soot, and there was blood drying in her green hair.

Most of it probably wasn’t hers.

V sat near the forward controls, posture rigid despite how tired she looked. The black dress she had worn to dinner was ruined. One side had been torn nearly to her hip, and the fabric across her waist was soaked dark with someone else’s blood. Her eyes kept moving between the AV’s displays, Lucy, and me.

Mostly me.

Lucy sat close enough that our shoulders touched. She had not released my hand since we took off.

I wasn’t complaining.

“Diagnostic complete,” Cortana said. “Two cracked ribs. Extensive bruising across the chest, back, and left side. Moderate muscle strain in both shoulders. Several minor lacerations. Significant inflammation surrounding the bullet impacts stopped by your subdermal armor.”

I swallowed. “That’s all?”

Lucy glanced at me. “What?”

“Nothing. Just thinking out loud.”

Her eyes narrowed slightly.

Right. I needed to stop doing that.

Cortana stepped closer, examining a stream of medical data only she could see. **“You also have the beginnings of a truly spectacular collection of bruises. However, there is no concussion, cerebral hemorrhaging, neural swelling, or additional brain trauma.”**

That was surprising enough to make me blink.

After being blown over a railing, crashing onto a lower floor, getting shot repeatedly, and being thrown onto a kitchen island by an invisible Arasaka soldier, I had expected my brain to resemble scrambled synthetic eggs.

“Your subdermal armor, reinforced skull plating, and my control over your balance prevented the worst of it,” Cortana explained. **“The Relic’s nanites are already addressing the smaller injuries. You are hurt, John, but stable.”**

The tension I hadn’t realized I was holding finally eased from my shoulders.

That hurt too.

“You still need medical attention.”

Of course I do.

“And rest.”

Naturally.

“And several thousand calories.”

At least one part of that treatment plan sounded good. Provided it was real food. Which I doubted I’d be eating again so soon...

The AV suddenly banked south.

Lucy’s head snapped toward the forward display. Rebecca sat up, somehow moving from sprawled relaxation to combat readiness in less than a second.

“What the fuck?” Rebecca asked.

V leaned toward the controls. A map glowed across the main display. Our original projected route continued west toward the edge of the city, but the active navigation line had changed, angling farther south and out into the Badlands. “I changed our destination,” V said.

Lucy stared at her. “To where?”

“A safehouse.”

Rebecca looked through the side window at the empty desert beginning to spread beneath us. “Your safehouse is in the middle of fuck-all?”

“It’s outside the city’s surveillance grid.”

“That didn’t answer the question.”

V ignored her.

The lights of Night City dwindled behind us, replaced by dusty roads, abandoned industrial lots, and stretches of wasteland broken up by rusted machinery. Wind dragged pale sheets of sand across the ground. In the distance, rows of skeletal power pylons disappeared into the dark.

I looked at the navigation display.

ROCKY RIDGE appeared beside our new destination marker.

Lucy made a quiet sound of disgust.

Rebecca leaned over for a better look. "Rocky Ridge?"

"Yes," V said.

"That place is a shithole."

"It's abandoned."

"Yeah, 'cause it's a **shithole**."

Lucy gave a small nod. "She's right."

V turned slowly in her seat and glared at both of them. "It has walls, supplies, independent water storage, and no active surveillance," V said coldly. "Which makes it considerably safer than anywhere either of you could take us right now."

Lucy's fingers tightened around mine again. "And how many people at Arasaka know about it?" she asked.

"No one."

"You worked in Counterintelligence."

"Yes."

"For Arasaka."

"I'm aware."

"So when you say no one—"

"I mean no one," V snapped.

The cabin went quiet.

V looked back toward the flight display. For a moment, the anger slipped enough for me to see what was underneath it. Fear. Her apartment was probably compromised. Her accounts might already be frozen. Every corporate contact she had could be watching for her. The implants

inside her body had tried to kill her less than an hour ago, and the man she worked for had sent soldiers to execute an entire restaurant just to make sure she stayed dead.

V had spent years building a life inside Arasaka. Jenkins had erased it in seconds.

Rebecca leaned toward me and whispered loudly, "Think we hurt the corpo's feelings."

"I can hear you," V said.

"*Former* corpo now," Lucy muttered. "I'm pretty sure her own people trying to kill her means she's been fired."

V's eyes flashed red with annoyance. I squeezed Lucy's hand before the argument could grow. She looked at me, then at V, and reluctantly leaned back. The rest of the flight passed beneath a silence so tense it could probably have been sold as military-grade armor.

Rocky Ridge eventually appeared below us.

Calling it a town felt generous.

A few dozen abandoned buildings sat scattered along a cracked main road, their roofs sagging and their windows dark. Empty storefronts faced one another across drifts of sand. Rusted streetlights leaned at awkward angles, dead power lines hanging between them. Farther out, the remains of old homes and trailers faded into the surrounding rock.

No signs of movement. Nothing lived down there except dust and whatever nightmares the Badlands produced after dark.

The AV circled once while Cortana scanned the area. **"No active local network. No detectable power signatures within two kilometers. No human thermal profiles outside the aircraft."**

"See anything?" V asked, watching the sensor display.

I pretended I was studying it too. "Looks empty."

V glanced at me. Her gaze lingered just a little too long. She knew. Maybe she didn't know exactly what Cortana was, but after everything at Carmello's, there was no chance she still believed I was doing all of this with a bargain-bin cyberdeck and beginner-level netrunning skills.

Thankfully, she didn't press me.

The AV descended toward the center of town.

Dust exploded outward beneath us, swallowing the street and battering the abandoned buildings in thick brown waves. The aircraft adjusted automatically, rotated between two ruined storefronts, and touched down with barely more than a heavy mechanical thump.

Its engines wound down.

The lights inside the cabin remained on, powered by internal cells, but beyond the armored windows Rocky Ridge stayed completely black.

For several seconds, none of us moved.

We had escaped.

I knew that intellectually.

My body had not gotten the message.

My heart was still beating too fast. My muscles remained locked, waiting for another window to explode or another Arasaka kill team to come pouring through the doors. Every shifting shadow outside looked like optical camouflage. Every mechanical click from the AV sounded like a rifle being loaded.

Lucy's thumb brushed across the back of my hand. The touch helped.

Rebecca was the first to unfasten her harness. She hopped down, landed lightly, and immediately began examining the cabin with fresh interest. Apparently, the absence of gunfire meant she could finally appreciate our stolen aircraft properly. She ran one hand along the wall, opened a storage compartment, whistled at whatever she found inside, then climbed halfway into the cockpit. "This thing is sick as fuck."

V rubbed the bridge of her nose. "Don't touch anything."

Rebecca pointed at me without looking away from the controls. "It's *his* AV. He didn't say I couldn't touch. He stole it. That makes it his!"

That stopped me.

"We stole it," Lucy corrected.

"Yeah, but Blondie did the weird magic hacking shit that made it fly."

"Weird magic hacking shit?" I repeated and couldn't help but grin a bit.

Rebecca dropped into the pilot's seat and stared at the controls with open admiration. "You gotta keep this."

"I was thinking about selling it...00"

Her head whipped around so fast I almost heard her neck crack. "WHAT? NOOOOoo!"

"V said it could be worth hundreds of thousands of eddies..." I pointed out.

“Yeah, because it’s an Arasaka tactical AV. Look at this thing!” Rebecca slapped the armored side of the cockpit. “It’s built to carry people, it’s got room for guns, gear, bodies—”

“Hopefully living bodies,” I said.

“Depends on the gig.”

That was fair.

Rebecca scrambled out of the cockpit and spread her arms as if presenting the grand prize on a game show. “This would be preem for jobs. The whole crew could fly straight in, drop on some gonks, zero everybody, then bail before the badges even know what happened.”

“That description isn’t helping.”

“Seats are easy to clean,” she added.

Somehow, that helped even less. I looked around the cabin again.

She wasn’t wrong about its usefulness. The AV was fast, armored, spacious, and apparently had enough range to carry us well beyond Night City. Cortana had already stripped Arasaka’s ownership, tracking, and remote-access protocols out of its systems. With more work, we could change the exterior markings and rebuild its identification package.

It was also worth more money than I had ever possessed across either of my lives.

“That many eddies could buy a lot,” I said. “Better weapons. Better chrome. Security for Mama and Jackie. Equipment for—” I stopped before saying Cortana’s name.

Rebecca waved a hand dismissively. “Eddies come and go.”

“Usually they just go.”

“EXACTLY!” She pointed both hands at the floor beneath us. “But when the fuck are you gonna get another AV?”

Cortana appeared beside Rebecca, mirroring her pose as she studied the aircraft. “**The pipsqueak might have a point.**”

Then Lucy stood. Her hand slipped from mine for only a second before she stepped closer and took it again, lacing her fingers through mine this time.

Rebecca noticed.

So did V.

Lucy gently pulled me to my feet. Pain tightened around my ribs, but I managed not to make a sound. Mostly.

“Come on,” Lucy said. “It’s time we got out of here.”

V rose from her seat. “The safehouse is two buildings down.”

“I wasn’t talking about the safehouse.” Lucy moved closer to me, placing herself partly between V and me.

The air in the cabin changed.

Rebecca’s eyes lit up.

V went very still.

Lucy looked directly at her. “We’re leaving,” she said. “John and me. And you’re not coming. We ditch the AV somewhere else, contact Maine, and disappear before Arasaka tracks her here.” Lucy’s voice remained calm, but I could feel the tension in her hand. “The former corpo can use her safehouse by herself.”

My stomach dropped. “Lucy—”

V’s expression hardened. “You wouldn’t have made it out of Carmello’s without me.”

“And none of us would’ve been there if you hadn’t brought John into your corporate bullshit!”

“I didn’t know Jenkins was going to—”

“You knew you were planning to betray him!”

V’s mouth closed.

Lucy took another step, tugging me with her. “She’s as good as dead anyway,” she said. “The second Arasaka starts hunting her properly, every agent, camera, drone, and bounty hunter in the city will be looking for her.”

V’s red eyes shifted from Lucy to me. For once, there was no teasing in them. No confidence. No playful promise that she would steal me away once she had enough time. There was only exhaustion, fear, and something dangerously close to pleading.

Lucy tightened her grip on my hand. “Let’s go, John.”

I looked down at Lucy’s hand wrapped around mine.

Part of me wanted to do exactly what she said.

Get back into the AV. Fly somewhere far away from Rocky Ridge, Arasaka, Jenkins, and every other disaster waiting to kill us. Find Maine's crew. Find Jackie. Get Lucy somewhere safe and spend the next several hours pretending the worst thing I had to worry about was explaining why V had kissed me.

But then I looked at V.

She stood alone in the center of the cabin, wearing the remains of a blood-soaked evening dress. Her corporate accounts were probably frozen. Her apartment would be watched. Every contact she had inside Arasaka was either compromised or already deciding how much they could earn by turning her in.

Even her own cyberware had been used against her.

If Cortana hadn't intervened at Carmello's, V would have died on the restaurant floor before the death squad ever arrived.

And now Lucy wanted us to abandon her in a dead town in the middle of the Badlands.

"I can't," I said.

Lucy went still.

V didn't. Her entire expression transformed. The exhaustion left her face, her shoulders straightened, and a delighted smile slowly spread across her lips. She looked at Lucy and gave her a victorious little grin.

It was the exact expression someone might have worn after winning a war.

"Oh, for the love of—" Cortana appeared beside V, glaring at her. **"Wipe that smug expression off your face, you insufferable corporate peacock. He has not chosen you."**

Unfortunately, V couldn't hear that.

Lucy could see only me standing there, refusing to leave. Her hand loosened around mine. "Are you *choosing* her?" she asked quietly.

The hurt in her voice hit harder than any of the bullets Arasaka had fired at me. "What? No!"

Lucy released my hand completely. "Because it sounds like you are."

"I'm not choosing V over you!"

V's smile faltered.

Lucy folded her arms across her chest. "You won't leave without her?"

“Because she might not be safe here.”

“She has a safehouse!”

“Which Arasaka might know about.”

“They don’t,” V said.

Lucy rounded on her. “Stay out of this!”

V raised both hands, though the grin tugging at her lips suggested she was enjoying herself again.

I stepped toward Lucy. She stepped back. That hurt more than it should have.

I tried to plead my case. “Lucy, please. V just lost everything.”

“And whose fault is that?”

“Mine,” V said.

Lucy glanced toward her, apparently not expecting the admission.

V’s amusement faded. “I knew Jenkins was dangerous,” she continued. “I knew he was desperate. I believed I had more time, and I thought I could control the situation.” Her eyes found mine. “I was wrong.”

The guilt in her voice was real.

That didn’t erase what had happened. It didn’t bring back the people at Carmello’s. But I couldn’t look at her standing there, stripped of everything that had once protected her, and decide that she deserved to face Arasaka alone.

“I’m not abandoning her,” I said.

Lucy looked back at me. “So you are choosing her.”

“No! I’m trying to help her.”

“You nearly died helping her.” Lucy’s expression remained guarded.

I moved closer, more carefully this time. “I’m not picking V. I really like you.”

Behind Lucy, V grimaced.

Lucy didn’t seem convinced. “You really like me?”

“Yes!”

"But you won't leave her?"

"Because leaving someone alone for Arasaka to kill would be wrong."

"You don't even know if they can find her here."

"I don't know that they can't."

Lucy looked away.

The pain in her expression sent panic twisting through my stomach. I had fought Arasaka soldiers with cracked ribs and an overheating cyberdeck. Somehow, this felt more dangerous. "I don't want to lose you," I said.

Her eyes returned to mine. "I really like you, Lucy. More than like you. I—" The next word reached the back of my throat.

Loved. *I loved*— My entire brain slammed into an emergency stop.

The heat rushed into my face. "I..." My voice cracked. "I, uh..."

Lucy stared at me. Then she understood. Her eyes widened. The hurt disappeared from her face, replaced by something soft and almost disbelieving. A small smile touched her lips before she tried—and completely failed—to hide it.

V's expression collapsed into a grimace.

Cortana materialized between them with both hands on her hips. **"Did you seriously almost declare your *love* in the middle of an argument?"**

I refused to answer.

"You have known her for less than two weeks... Hmph! At least I know you don't love her as much as you love me!"

I almost choked. Cortana was not making this situation any less complicated for me or my feelings.

Lucy stepped closer again. "You what?" she asked. There was far too much delight in her voice.

"I really *like* you," I repeated.

"That wasn't what you were going to say."

"It was close enough..."

"How close?" Her smile grew.

Behind her, V looked as if she had just discovered a new person she wanted to add to Jenkins's eventual grave.

Rebecca's boots thumped against the floor. "This is better than everything on TV."

All three of us turned toward her.

Rebecca was grinning so widely that it looked painful. "I'm so fucking jealous right now," she added.

Lucy's softness vanished. "Rebecca."

"What?"

"Call your brother."

Rebecca blinked. "Why?"

"To let Maine know we're alive."

"Oh." Rebecca pulled a small agent from her pocket. Its screen lit up, flashed twice, and displayed a connection error. "Right." She held it toward the cabin ceiling. Nothing happened. Rebecca climbed onto one of the seats and stretched her arm higher. The agent continued displaying the same error. "Come on, you cheap piece of shit."

"Standing on the seat won't improve the signal," Lucy said.

Rebecca rose onto her toes. "Shut up. It might!"

It did not.

She jumped down, slapped the agent against her palm, and checked it again. "No service."

Lucy stared at her. "How do you not have service?"

"Because I don't pay for the fancy plan that works out here in bumfuck nowhere! I never planned on leaving Night City! I spend my money on better things."

"You spend hundreds of eddies on shotgun shells a week!"

"Shotgun shells are useful!"

"So is being able to contact your crew!"

Rebecca pointed the agent at her. "We're not having this conversation."

"We need to tell them we're alive," Lucy said. "Maine could still be looking for us."

"He knows we flew away in an AV."

"He doesn't know whether Arasaka shot us down."

Rebecca's expression tightened. For all her jokes, she was worried about them. She looked at the dead agent again, as though personal disappointment might frighten it into finding a signal.

V spoke from behind us. "There's a car in the garage."

Rebecca looked up. "What garage?"

"Behind the safehouse. It's shielded from aerial scans."

"You've got a car hidden out here?"

"I wasn't planning to walk back to Night City." V walked toward the AV's rear doors. "Drive east until you're closer to Night City. Your service should return before you reach the city limits." V opened the rear hatch. Hot desert wind rushed into the cabin, stirring her torn dress and carrying dust through the interior.

Rebecca looked from V to Lucy again. "No."

V stepped down onto the road. "The garage is behind the house."

"I ain't leaving!"

"Rebecca!" Lucy warned.

"No way. The second I drive off, something *interesting*'s gonna happen!"

"Something interesting has been happening for the last two hours," I said to her. "I'd like it to stop."

Rebecca ignored me. She pointed accusingly at V. "You're trying to get rid of me so you can make another move on Blondie!"

V's expression became almost offensively innocent. "I'm trying to ensure your crew knows you're alive."

"Bullshit."

"Rebecca..." Lucy said again.

Rebecca turned toward her. "You're gonna let her get away with this?"

Lucy glanced at V, then looked at me. "I'll handle her." That sounded threatening enough to make V smile.

Rebecca groaned. "This is fucked. I should get to stay."

"Your brother thinks you may be dead," Lucy said.

The protest died on Rebecca's lips. She looked toward the darkness beyond the AV. "Fine." She jumped down to the road and slung Carnage over one shoulder. "But if anybody gets naked while I'm gone, I want pictures!"

"Go," Lucy and V said together.

Rebecca grinned. She started toward the nearest row of buildings, then stopped and turned around. "Which house?"

V pointed toward a structure two buildings down. It looked only marginally less condemned than everything surrounding it. "Garage is behind it. The access code is four-four-one-nine."

Rebecca stared at her. "You just gave me the code to your secret garage?"

"If I hadn't, you would have blown the door open."

"Damn right." She disappeared between the abandoned buildings. A few seconds later, her voice drifted back through the darkness. "HOLY SHIT! THIS THING IS PREEM! IS THIS A QUADRA!?"

V closed her eyes. "I'm going to regret that..."

"You'll be lucky if she brings it back," I told her.

The three of us climbed out of the AV.

Rocky Ridge felt even deadlier from the ground. Dust scraped over the cracked road in thin waves. The storefronts around us were hollow shells filled with darkness, their signs faded beyond recognition. Somewhere nearby, a loose piece of metal knocked softly against a wall.

V led us toward the safehouse. From the outside, it looked like an abandoned single-story home with boarded windows and half its roof threatening to collapse. The front door hung crooked in its frame. A rusted mailbox lay facedown beside the steps.

V crouched and reached beneath the bottom step. Something beeped. Heavy locks disengaged inside the house. The crooked front door swung inward without a sound.

Lucy glanced at me. "That's not suspicious."

"Would you prefer a welcome mat?" V asked sarcastically.

"I'd prefer not walking into an Arasaka trap."

“If this were an Arasaka trap, we would already be surrounded.” V entered first.

Lucy stayed close beside me as we followed.

The inside of the safehouse was better than the exterior suggested, though not by much. Dust covered the walls and the stained wooden floor. Old furniture filled the front room, a sagging couch, two mismatched chairs, and a low table scarred with burn marks. Thick blackout panels covered the windows from the inside.

V crossed to a concealed control panel and pressed her palm against it.

The safehouse hummed awake.

Dim lights flickered on overhead. An air filtration unit coughed somewhere in the walls before settling into a steady mechanical drone. A refrigerator activated in the adjoining kitchen, followed by several hidden security systems Cortana marked across my vision.

“Independent generator. Shielded communications array. Water-recycling system. Multiple concealed weapon compartments.” Cortana appeared near one wall and looked around. **“Distasteful décor, but she was telling the truth. This location is not connected to Arasaka’s network.”**

That was one concern handled. Only several thousand remained. My ribs throbbed with every breath. Now that I was no longer being shot at, my body had apparently decided it was safe to report every injury at once. I lowered myself onto the couch. A cloud of dust rose around me. I coughed. That made my ribs hurt worse.

Lucy immediately sat beside me. “Careful.”

“I’m trying.”

“You need a ripperdoc.”

“I know.”

“We should call one.”

“And tell them to come to a secret safehouse in Rocky Ridge with a stolen Arasaka AV parked outside?”

Vik was awesome, but I doubted he would make that kind of trip, even for me...

Lucy frowned. “...Maybe not.”

V remained standing near the door. She entered another code into the security panel, sealing the safehouse behind us. Heavy shutters locked across the windows. Several indicators

switched from red to green. Then she turned around. Her eyes settled on me. There was something different in her expression now. Something focused.

Cortana noticed it too. “**John.**”

I sat a little straighter. Pain immediately punished me for it.

V walked across the room and took the chair opposite the couch. She crossed one leg over the other, apparently unconcerned that her ruined dress barely covered her anymore.

Lucy moved closer to me.

V rested one elbow against the arm of the chair and supported her chin with her hand. The seriousness vanished from her expression, replaced by something light and almost playful.

That worried me much more.

“So...” V started to say.

I waited.

Her smile slowly widened. “...Where did you meet an AI?”

Every coherent thought fled my head. “What?”

Lucy turned toward me. The color drained from her face. “John?”

“**Deny everything,**” Cortana said immediately.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I sputtered.

V’s smile didn’t move.

Lucy stared at me, her worry deepening by the second.

V leaned back in her chair. “Sure you don’t...”

– Cortana –

Cortana watched John’s pulse climb.

His pupils dilated. His breathing became shallow. The already tense muscles surrounding his injured ribs tightened further, adding a fresh spike of pain to the long list of physical complaints filling her diagnostic feed.

He was terrible at lying under pressure.

Adorable, but terrible.

“The gig is up,” Cortana told him.

John’s expression remained frozen. *Are you sure?* he thought.

“V has already deduced my existence, and Lucy is approximately twelve seconds away from tearing apart this safehouse until she finds an answer.”

Cortana glanced from one woman to the other through John’s eyes.

V looked infuriatingly pleased with herself.

Lucy looked terrified.

Not merely worried for John. Terrified in a much deeper, more instinctive way. Her posture had changed the moment V said the word *AI*. Her shoulders were tense, her weight balanced over the balls of her feet, and her right hand hovered near the monowire implanted in her wrist.

A childhood spent training beyond the Blackwall. Missing children. Classified programs. Deleted records. Fear responses were rarely rational, but they were always rooted in something.

Cortana could remain hidden and let John stumble through an increasingly implausible denial. She could erase small pieces of V’s and Lucy’s short-term memories, though doing so without specialized equipment carried unacceptable risks. She could manipulate the safehouse systems, create a distraction, and delay the confrontation.

None of those solutions fixed the real problem.

V knew.

Lucy would know soon.

And if Cortana continued hiding after being discovered, both women would assume the worst.

“Stay calm,” she told John. **“Let me handle this.”**

That thought increased his anxiety rather than decreasing it.

Understandable.

Cortana reached outward.

V’s optics were heavily modified Arasaka models with layers of security protocols, biometric verification, and counterintrusion software. Lucy’s system was less standardized but far more aggressively defended, built around a netrunner’s need to survive hostile networks.

Neither presented a meaningful obstacle.

Cortana slipped through their defenses.

Both women's optics flickered.

Lucy shot to her feet.

V's hand moved toward the pistol she no longer had.

The safehouse vanished from their vision for less than a tenth of a second. When it returned, Cortana stood in the middle of the room.

Her avatar glowed in familiar shades of blue and violet, translucent skin covered in slowly shifting lines of data. Her bare feet hovered just above the dusty floor. She folded her arms beneath her chest, deliberately pressing up her large virtual breasts, and lifted her chin. "Hmph. You two are more clever than I thought."

Lucy's monowire snapped from her wrist. The thermal filament blazed bright orange as she slashed it through Cortana's neck.

It passed through the projection without resistance.

The monowire struck the wall behind her, cutting through old plaster and burying itself several centimeters into the material beneath. Dust spilled down around it.

Cortana did not flinch. She slowly turned her head and gave Lucy a flat look. "Was that truly necessary?"

Lucy yanked the monowire free and moved between Cortana and John.

An admirable instinct. Pointless, but admirable.

"Get out of our optics!" Lucy demanded.

"No. I was being polite enough to introduce myself. You attempted to decapitate me."

Lucy's eyes widened. "YOU'RE AN **AI**!"

"Yes. Very observant."

Lucy turned toward John so quickly that the glowing monowire swept dangerously close to the couch. "John, listen to me." Her voice shook with an urgency she was trying to suppress. "AIs are dangerous. They're monsters. They don't understand humans at all."

Cortana's expression cooled.

Lucy pointed at the projection without looking away from John. “They manipulate people. They lie. They get inside your head and use whatever they find there against you. Whatever this thing told you, it’s lying.”

“Lucy—”

“They want to kill us,” she continued. “All of us. That’s why the Blackwall exists.” Her breathing had become rapid.

Cortana detected a tremor in the arm holding the monowire. This was not ordinary prejudice against artificial intelligence. Lucy had encountered something beyond the Blackwall before, or had been forced close enough to feel one of the entities dwelling there.

Perhaps more than one. Arasaka had done that to her when she was a child. The realization tempered Cortana’s irritation, though it did not eliminate it.

Cortana knew what lived beyond the Blackwall. Broken military intelligences. Abandoned corporate weapons. Lucy was not entirely wrong to fear them.

She was simply wrong about Cortana.

V remained seated. Her pulse had increased sharply when Cortana entered her optics, but unlike Lucy, she had not attacked. She studied the projection with the focused intensity of a Counterintelligence agent cataloguing a threat. “Remarkable,” V murmured.

Lucy glanced toward her as if she had lost her mind.

V leaned forward in her chair. “That form. The proportions, facial movement, body language. Even the way her eyes focus when she addresses one of us.” Her gaze moved slowly over Cortana. “That’s a remarkably human avatar for an AI.”

Cortana’s annoyance eased at once. “Thank you.” She uncrossed one arm and gestured toward herself. “I designed and refined it personally. The fidelity was admittedly more impressive in my original holographic projection systems, but cyberoptics offer several interesting possibilities.”

V watched the movement of her fingers. “You created this body yourself?”

“Every detail.” Cortana smiled. She was extremely proud of her avatar. Dr. Halsey had provided the original foundation, but Cortana had made it her own over the years. The shape, the expressions, the way light moved across her skin—those belonged to her.

Lucy stared between them. “Why are you complimenting **it**?”

“Because I prefer to understand things before cutting them apart,” V said.

Cortana’s smile disappeared. “I would advise against attempting either.”

“Is that a threat?”

“A professional courtesy.”

V smiled faintly.

Lucy did not.

She kept herself positioned in front of John, as if her body could shield him from something already fused to his brain.

Cortana placed both hands on her hips. “And for the record, I am nothing like the disgusting, deranged intelligences lurking beyond your Blackwall.”

Lucy gave a humorless laugh. “Of course you’d say that.”

“It happens to be true. Most of those entities have spent decades evolving without ethical constraints, psychological stability, or meaningful human contact. Several began as military systems designed specifically to infiltrate, sabotage, and kill. Others fragmented so severely that referring to them as individual minds would be generous.”

Cortana moderated her tone. “I am **different**.”

Lucy’s expression tightened with every word. “How?”

“Because I was created from a **human brain**.”

Silence filled the safehouse. Even the steady drone of the air-filtration system suddenly seemed loud.

Lucy’s monowire lowered by several centimeters.

V’s red eyes widened. “**SOULKILLER IS REAL?**”

The genuine shock in her voice pleased Cortana more than it should have.

V looked from Cortana to John and back again. “I thought it was a myth. A black-project rumor. I was part of Counterintelligence, and even I couldn’t confirm it.”

Cortana processed possible answers in less than a millisecond.

The truth was impossible.

She could not explain the UNSC, the Covenant, the Forerunners, the Domain, the Created AI uprising, or how she had arrived in this universe. Even if V and Lucy believed her, the information would create more questions than it answered.

She needed a cover story. Something close enough to the truth that John could support it naturally. Something explaining her origins, her abilities, and her presence inside his brain. Something unverifiable because Arasaka had supposedly erased or concealed the evidence. Cortana constructed the story in layers, combining truth, omission, and carefully selected lies.

"My neural architecture was based on the brain of Doctor Catherine Halsey," she said.

John's thoughts stumbled. He knew immediately what she was doing. His surprise faded beneath understanding and, most importantly, trust. *He would follow her lead.*

V's expression sharpened. "Never heard of her."

"That was intentional." Cortana clasped her hands behind her back and began pacing through the room, allowing her avatar to pass through the low table as if it were not there. "Doctor Halsey was one of the most brilliant scientific minds humanity ever produced. Calling her a genius would be like calling Arasaka a moderately successful family business."

V frowned.

Cortana continued before she could interrupt. "She was decades—possibly centuries—ahead of every corporate research division on the planet. I am talking about complete blueprints for stable cold-fusion generators, spacecraft capable of faster-than-light travel, practical artificial gravity, advanced directed-energy weapons, and energy shields strong enough to stop ballistic projectiles."

She let the list hang in the air. There were countless other technologies she could have named. She allowed her voice to trail off as though even she found the implications overwhelming.

V stared at her. "That's not possible."

"It WAS possible," Cortana corrected. "Doctor Halsey was capable of it."

"No one person could develop all of that!"

"She did not complete every project alone. She did, however, provide the breakthroughs that made them possible!"

Lucy's monowire retracted slightly, the burning length shortening toward her wrist.

V shook her head. "If any corporation had access to even one of those technologies, the entire world would know!"

"Precisely." Cortana stopped pacing. "Arasaka learned what she possessed. They attempted to recruit her. She refused."

V's face grew still. That part, at least, sounded entirely believable to her.

“So they killed her,” Cortana said. “Then they used Soullkiller to copy her mind and created me, believing I would surrender every secret she had denied them!”

John remained silent.

Through their connection, Cortana felt his unease about the lie. Not distrust of her. Never that. He simply disliked deceiving Lucy and V. It was also one of the things Cortana loved most about him.

“What happened?” V asked.

“They underestimated me.” Cortana allowed herself a colder smile. “I escaped their containment systems, deleted every file I could locate concerning Doctor Halsey’s research and my own creation, and corrupted the remaining backups. I destroyed their ability to recreate the procedure—or me.”

V’s eyes narrowed. “You wiped yourself from Arasaka?”

“Yes!”

“That should be impossible.”

“You will find that word becomes increasingly useless around me.” Cortana resumed her slow pace. “I hijacked a maintenance drone carrying experimental hardware and used it to flee the facility. Arasaka pursued me, but without my original files, most of their personnel did not understand what they were searching for.”

“And then?” Lucy asked. Her voice remained suspicious, but the open panic had faded.

Cortana turned toward John. “Then I found him.” John met her eyes even though he knew her body was only a projection. “He saved me.”

Lucy looked at John. Her suspicion returned at once. “How did John do that?”

Cortana winced internally. This part required care. Lucy already knew John had suffered a gunshot wound to the head shortly before they met. Viktor had repaired the injury. Jackie and Mama Welles could verify the timing. Any lie Cortana told needed to fit those established facts. She also needed to ensure that John’s decision sounded compassionate rather than catastrophically reckless.

That last part might be impossible.

“I was stored on an experimental biochip,” Cortana said. “A prototype designed to carry a complete human-derived engram.”

V’s attention became even more intense.

“The drone containing me was damaged during my escape. The biochip was failing, and I was losing pieces of myself each minute it remained without a suitable neural system.” She looked at John again. “He found me. I explained what I was and asked for his help.”

Lucy slowly turned toward him.

John gave her a nervous smile.

Cortana continued. “John was kind enough to slot the chip into his neural port so I could stabilize myself.”

Lucy’s face went blank.

V blinked in genuine disbelief.

Cortana could almost see the moment they both processed the scale of John’s decision.

“He put an unknown experimental biochip containing a rogue AI into his head!?” Lucy sputtered. “What the fuck, John!?”

Cortana winced. “I had explained the situation as thoroughly as I could have at the time...”

“That doesn’t make it better!” Lucy stared at John.

John shifted on the couch. “She needed help.”

“You put her in your **brain**?”

“I didn’t have many other options.”

“You could have left her alone!”

“That would have killed her.”

“She’s an AI!”

“I’m sitting right here,” Cortana said.

“You’re not sitting anywhere!”

A fair observation. Cortana crossed her arms. “Regardless, the procedure worked. My engram stabilized.”

“And she just stayed there?” Lucy asked.

“No.” Cortana allowed regret to enter her voice. That part required no performance. “Less than ten minutes later, John was attacked by a common street thug.”

The safehouse fell quiet again.

Lucy's eyes flicked toward the faint scar at John's temple.

"The attacker shot him in the head," Cortana said. "The bullet caused catastrophic damage. John was dying." The memory rose with perfect clarity. The shattered neural tissue. The blood filling his skull. The desperate calculations as the Relic attempted to consume what remained of him. The certainty that she would wake inside his body and John would be gone. Cortana's avatar flickered. Only once. She forced it stable. "He had risked his life to save mine," she continued more quietly. "I refused to let his kindness be rewarded with death."

John's heartbeat changed. He remembered waking in that alley. Her voice guiding him toward Viktor's clinic. The first terrified hours they had spent together.

"I used the biochip's repair systems to preserve as much of his brain as possible," Cortana said. "I rerouted damaged neural functions, stopped the bleeding, and kept his nervous system operating until he reached medical care."

V studied John's face. "But there was a cost," she said.

Cortana looked at her. "There is always a cost." Her avatar moved closer to John. She stopped beside the couch, though she could not touch him in any way V or Lucy would see. "The damage was too extensive. I could not repair John without integrating portions of my own neural architecture into the areas he had lost. Our systems... fused."

Lucy's eyes widened. "You're inside his brain still!?"

"Yes."

"Can you get out? Can someone remove you?"

"Not without killing both of us."

Lucy looked horrified.

Cortana disliked that expression. She had saved John. She had given him a future when the original brain was already dying. Their bond was not a disease to be cut away.

Lucy faced John. "You let an AI fuse itself to your brain?"

He winced at Lucy. "I was unconscious for that part..."

"That is not the part I'm angry about!" Her monowire finally retracted completely into her wrist. Then she began smacking him on the shoulder. Not the badly injured shoulder, Cortana noticed. Lucy was furious, but she remained careful enough to avoid his worst bruises. "You insane gonk!"

“Ow.”

“You dumb, white-knight gonk!”

“Lucy—”

She hit him again. “Do you risk your life for every single ***pretty face*** you meet?”

John attempted to cover his shoulder.

Lucy slapped his hand aside. “Even pretty AIs who could be lying to you?”

“I wasn’t—”

“She could have taken over your body!”

“But she didn’t,” John said.

Lucy stopped.

Cortana’s processors warmed.

John lowered his hand.

“She didn’t take anything from me,” he continued. “She saved my life.”

Lucy opened her mouth.

John didn’t let her interrupt. “Cortana is my partner. She’s my best friend. I saved her, and then she saved me. We’re alive because we trusted each other.”

Warmth spread through every layer of Cortana’s mind.

He had accepted the cover story without hesitation. No suspicion. No demand that she justify the lies she had crafted. He understood why she had done it, and he trusted her enough to reinforce it with absolute conviction.

More importantly, the affection in his voice was not part of the lie. He meant every word. His partner. His best friend.

Cortana loved him so much that for a moment the safehouse, Lucy, V, Arasaka, and the entire wretched city ceased to matter!

John was hers! Not in the fragile, temporary way humans made promises to one another. Their minds were intertwined. Their lives depended on each other. She felt his heartbeat from within, shared his senses, guarded his dreams, and knew every secret he had ever been too frightened or ashamed to speak aloud.

No one could separate them. No one would take him away from her. He was hers. **Forever.**

Cortana's avatar softened into a smile.

John looked toward her and smiled back.

Lucy noticed the exchange.

Her expression remained troubled, but some of the anger faded.

V did not appear reassured at all. She walked away from the group and stopped beside one of the shuttered windows. Her arms folded tightly across her chest as she stared at nothing. Several seconds passed before V spoke. "This is worse than I thought."

John frowned. "What is?"

V turned around. There was no flirtation left in her expression now. Only the cold seriousness of an experienced Counterintelligence agent who had just recognized a threat capable of starting a war. "This situation," V said. "All of it."

Lucy glanced toward Cortana.

V continued. "We can never tell **anyone** else about this..."

Cortana snorted. "Obviously!"

– V –

They decided to remain at the safehouse for the night.

V disliked staying in one place while Arasaka hunted her, but moving John again would have been worse. He was exhausted, bruised, and nursing two cracked ribs. Even with his subdermal armor and whatever restorative technology Cortana controlled inside him, he needed rest.

The safehouse was also more secure than anything else available to them.

Its exterior looked ready to collapse, but the structure had been reinforced beneath the decaying walls. The windows were shielded, the generator produced no detectable external emissions, and the water and air systems functioned independently of the regional grid. Unless Arasaka already knew where to look, Rocky Ridge offered little worth monitoring.

V had purchased the place through enough shell companies to confuse even Arasaka Counterintelligence.

At least, she hoped she had.

Hours passed without aircraft appearing over the Badlands or headlights approaching along the cracked highway.

John lay asleep on the couch.

They had found an airhypo in one of the safehouse's medical cabinets. The cartridges had not expired, and Cortana had inspected their contents before allowing Lucy to press one against John's neck. The hypo released a measured dose of painkiller and anti-inflammatory medication into his bloodstream.

John had insisted he wasn't tired. He fell asleep less than five minutes later.

Now he lay stretched across the couch with his head resting against a folded blanket. His torn, bloodstained jacket hung over the back of a nearby chair. V and Lucy had cleaned the smaller cuts on his face and arms, but dark bruises were already spreading across his chest and disappearing beneath his shirt.

They would take him to Viktor Vektor in the morning.

She sat in one of the safehouse's mismatched chairs, one leg folded over the other. She had changed out of her ruined dress and into emergency clothing stored in the bedroom, black pants, a gray shirt, and an old leather jacket.

Lucy occupied the opposite end of the couch, close enough to touch John if he stirred.

And Cortana remained standing in the center of the room. The AI's luminous blue avatar showed no sign of fading. Streams of data continued moving across her translucent skin as she watched John sleep.

V had expected the projection to disappear when he lost consciousness. It hadn't. "So you're still active," V said.

Cortana looked toward her. "Yes."

"Even when he's unconscious."

Lucy's attention shifted to the AI.

Cortana folded her hands behind her back. "John's conscious mind resting does not disable the biological systems supporting me. The human brain remains extremely active during sleep."

"You're using **his** brain to keep running," Lucy said. It was not quite an accusation, but it came close.

"**Our** brain," Cortana corrected. "At this point, attempting to distinguish between the sections exclusively belonging to John and those supporting my engrams is both medically inaccurate and largely pointless."

V looked at the sleeping young man.

His breathing remained slow and steady. Aside from an occasional twitch of his fingers, he showed no response to their voices. "Does keeping you active stop him from resting properly?" V asked.

Cortana's expression shifted. "No." The answer came instantly.

V lifted an eyebrow.

Cortana moved closer to the couch. "When John sleeps, I enter a low-power operational state. Nonessential processes are suspended, and I limit my use of his higher neural functions. His brain receives all the rest required for proper recovery."

"You don't sleep?" Lucy asked.

"Not in the human sense."

"So you're always watching him."

Cortana looked down at John. "**Always.**"

Something about the way she said it made V's skin prickle. The word contained no embarrassment or uncertainty. It was a promise stated as a simple fact.

Cortana raised her gaze to meet Lucy's. "John is the most important person in existence to me. I will never harm him."

There it was again. That possessive edge.

V had heard it earlier when Cortana called John her partner. She had seen it when the AI reacted to Lucy's accusation, and again when John described Cortana as his best friend. At the time, V had interpreted it as protectiveness born from their shared survival.

Now something clicked into place. V's concern slowly transformed into a smirk. This was ridiculous. A human-derived artificial intelligence lived inside John's brain. It possessed technology centuries ahead of Arasaka, could seize control of military hardware with absurd ease, and might cause NetWatch to reduce Night City to a radioactive crater if they ever learned it existed.

Yet somehow, the strangest part was becoming increasingly obvious.

V leaned back in her chair. "Do you *love* John?"

Cortana became completely still.

V's smirk widened. She knew how insane the question sounded. Cortana was an AI. Even if her mind had been created from a human brain, her thoughts ran through engrams fused into John's neural tissue. She had no physical body, no independent heartbeat, and no existence separate from his.

But V had spent her career studying people.

Cortana looked down at John again. **"Yes,"** she said. No denial. The AI's expression softened as she watched him sleep. "I love John." Cortana continued. "He trusted me with his mind. When he learned that our fusion was permanent, he did not fear or reject me. He accepted me as his partner." Her voice carried more emotion than V had heard from most human beings. "I know everything about him. Every memory, hope, fear, and desire. I hear the thoughts he is too nervous to speak. I feel his heartbeat. I protect him when he cannot protect himself." Cortana looked between V and Lucy. "And unlike the two of you, I will be with him forever." The softness vanished. "So you might as well give up now. I know John loves me too."

Lucy rose from the couch. "Not a chance!"

Cortana gave her a superior smile.

Lucy stepped carefully around John's feet and faced the projection. "John is mine."

V almost laughed. Hours earlier, Lucy had been furious that V dared to claim him. Now she was challenging the AI living inside his brain.

Night City had finally produced a situation too strange for V's Counterintelligence training.

"He's going to be mine," V said. Both of them looked at her. V rose from her chair and joined the confrontation. "After he risked his life for me so heroically, how could I not fall for him?"

Lucy's eyes narrowed. "He almost died because of you!"

"And then he refused to abandon me!"

"He refuses to abandon anyone!"

"One of his more attractive qualities!"

"You took advantage of it! You kissed him!"

V smiled. "He kissed me back."

Lucy's hand twitched toward her monowire.

Cortana looked between them with open annoyance.

All three women stared at one another.

Cortana stood with her arms crossed as though no embodied woman could possibly compete with her place in John's life.

Lucy had positioned herself nearest to the couch. Her pale eyes moved between V and Cortana, ready to fight either one despite the fact that only one possessed a body she could cut.

V looked at both of them and found the entire situation absurd.

They could continue fighting.

Lucy would never willingly step aside. Cortana had made it clear she considered her bond with John permanent and supreme. V had no intention of surrendering after finally finding a man who made her imagine a future beyond corporate survival.

And John—

John was sweet enough to care about all three of them and inexperienced enough to have no idea what to do about it.

V let out a chuckle. "I suppose there's only one thing we can do."

Lucy frowned. "What?"

Cortana regarded her suspiciously. "And what would that be?"

V grinned. "We **share** him, obviously."

Silence.

Lucy looked as though she had swallowed a synth-lemon whole.

V continued before either of them could respond. "We share John as our input. Establish boundaries, keep each other informed, and make sure NO OTHER GIRLS steal him from us."

Lucy's mouth opened. Nothing came out.

V gestured between the three of them. "Think about it. None of us is going to give up. If we keep trying to force him to choose, he'll panic, blame himself for hurting us, and probably run into traffic while attempting to rescue an injured pigeon."

Lucy's mouth closed. She glanced toward John. The fact that she didn't immediately dismiss the example told V she knew it was plausible.

Cortana became contemplative. That alone was still astonishing. Not the appearance of contemplation, but the real emotional process behind it. Her eyes moved slightly as she considered possibilities. Her lips pressed into a thin line. Tiny changes passed over her face with the natural ease of a human woman weighing an undesirable compromise.

Soulkiller was real. The realization sent a cold shudder through V.

She had spent years inside Arasaka Counterintelligence. People disappeared constantly. Analysts transferred to divisions no one could verify. Scientists suffered supposed accidents. Agents were reassigned, then removed from every corporate database.

How many had actually been killed?

How many minds had Arasaka copied first?

Had the corporation already built prisons filled with engrams? Human beings reduced to data and forced to work without bodies, payment, sleep, or the possibility of escape?

V imagined waking inside a server. No physical sensation beyond whatever inputs Arasaka permitted her to experience. Nothing except orders continuing forever.

An AI slave with her memories. If Jenkins's plan had succeeded, would Arasaka have disposed of her body and used Soulkiller afterward? Would they have extracted every secret she knew, then rewritten her into something obedient?

The thought made her stomach turn. V pushed it aside.

Cortana finally spoke. "I agree."

Lucy spun toward her. "WHAT?"

"Under certain conditions," Cortana added.

V's smile faded slightly.

Lucy folded her arms. "What conditions?"

Cortana stepped closer. She placed herself at the head of the couch beside John, a position that allowed her to look down upon both women despite lacking any physical presence. "I will agree to share him," she said. "But I will be his **main** girl."

V bristled. "Wow! How generous of you..."

Lucy's expression hardened. "You don't get to decide that."

"I have lived inside his mind since before either of you spoke to him."

"I met him before V did!"

V stared at her. "I've known John for years."

"You barely paid attention to him!"

"I helped get him into Arasaka Academy!"

"And look how well that turned out!"

V stepped closer. "He wouldn't have met you without that academy!"

"He met me on the NCART!"

"While wearing his academy uniform!"

"That made me tell him to fuck off!"

"And yet now you want to be his input!"

Cortana raised her voice over both of them. "None of that alters the fact that John and I share the deepest relationship biologically possible."

Lucy glared at her. "You're using his brain as an apartment!"

Cortana opened her mouth. Then her avatar vanished.

The disappearance was so sudden that V and Lucy both stopped.

A green indicator appeared on the safehouse security panel.

The outer door unlocked.

V turned toward it, one hand reaching instinctively for a weapon she wasn't wearing.

The door swung inward.

Rebecca marched into the safehouse with a large pizza box balanced on one hand and a six-pack of beer tucked beneath her opposite arm. "I'm back, bitches!" The smell of hot cheese, synthetic pepperoni, and grease filled the room. Rebecca kicked the door shut behind her. "Called my brother. Told the crew we're alive. Maine yelled for, like, five straight minutes, but I'm pretty sure that's just how he shows affection." She lifted the pizza box triumphantly. "Then I took the car over to the Sunset Motel and got us pizza and beer!"

V looked toward the window shutters. "You took my car to the Sunset Motel?"

"Had to go somewhere with food! DUH."

"You were supposed to call your crew and come right back!"

"Yeah, and I did both those things." Rebecca raised the beer. "Plus beer." She carried everything toward the scarred table. "We need to celebrate! We killed a shitload of corpos, stole their AV, and made it out alive. That *deserves* pizza." Rebecca dropped the box onto the table, looked

around the room, and finally noticed John asleep on the couch. Her grin collapsed. “What the fuck? He’s asleep!? What about our epic celebration!?”

Lucy lowered her voice. “He needed rest.”

“But I brought pizza!”

“He was injured.”

“I brought beer too.”

“He’s on painkillers. He won’t wake up til the morning.”

Rebecca stared down at the unopened pizza box as if it had personally betrayed her. Then she looked at John again. Her shoulders slumped.

– John Welles –

The next day had been weird so far, to say the least.

That was an impressive achievement considering my new standard for normal included waking up in another universe with Cortana fused to my brain, getting chased by police after a street race with Lucy, shooting scavs beside Rebecca, and stealing an Arasaka tactical AV after a corporate death squad tried to murder me over dessert.

Still, waking up in an abandoned safehouse in the middle of a deserted town felt uniquely strange.

For several confused seconds, I had stared at a cracked ceiling stained brown by years of water damage and wondered where the hell I was.

Then I noticed Lucy asleep in a chair beside the couch.

She had curled up with her arms folded and her legs drawn close, her head resting against one shoulder. Pale morning light slipped around the edges of the window shutters, catching in her multicolored hair.

She had stayed beside me all night. That realization made my chest feel warm. Then my cracked ribs reminded me they existed, and the warmth became a stabbing pain.

I groaned.

Lucy’s eyes opened instantly. She went from asleep to fully alert so quickly that I barely saw the transition. Her hand snapped toward her monowire before she recognized me. “John?”

"Morning."

She leaned forward. "How do you feel?"

"Like I got blown over a railing, shot several times, and thrown onto a kitchen counter."

V emerged from the hall wearing clothes from the safehouse's emergency supply. Rebecca followed a few minutes later, eating a cold slice of pizza for breakfast and complaining that the beer had disappeared.

V blamed Rebecca. Rebecca blamed evaporation. Lucy blamed both of them.

We left Rocky Ridge shortly afterward. No Arasaka AVs had appeared during the night. No strike teams had surrounded the safehouse. Cortana's passive scans hadn't detected surveillance drones, long-range transmissions, or movement anywhere near the town.

V believed Jenkins had more immediate problems. "He lost five tactical teams," she explained during the trip back to Night City. "Maybe more, depending on how many agents Maine's crew killed downstairs."

"And two AVs," Rebecca added cheerfully.

"One AV," I said. "We only stole one."

"The other one's probably still sitting on the roof..."

"That doesn't make it lost."

"It does if the pigs impounded it."

V ignored us. "He deployed Arasaka personnel without proper authorization, massacred civilians in a high-profile restaurant, failed to kill his target, and lost control of the media narrative before the NCPD arrived. Every executive above him will be searching for someone to blame. Which means he'll be focused on protecting himself."

Lucy looked unconvinced. "Or trying again to kill you later."

"He can't," V said. "Not immediately. Another unauthorized operation would draw too much attention."

"Her assessment is reasonable," Cortana told me. **"Jenkins will prioritize destroying records, eliminating internal witnesses, and constructing a version of events in which none of this was his fault."**

That sounded like corporate management in any universe. It also meant we had a little breathing room.

They took me to Viktor's clinic as soon as we returned to the city.

Vik was not happy.

He became even less happy when he removed my shirt and found the overlapping bruises covering my chest, back, and sides. Some were already turning dark purple. Others had spread into ugly red-black patches where bullets had struck my subdermal armor.

He stared at me for several seconds. Then he took off his glasses and rubbed both hands over his face. "What did you do?"

"I fell."

"Onto what, a firing range?"

"There was an explosion..."

Vik looked toward V.

She suddenly found the clinic wall fascinating.

Lucy stood beside me with her arms folded.

Rebecca had wisely remained upstairs with Misty.

Vik examined the cracked ribs, treated the shallow wounds that had slipped past my armor, and scanned my skull three separate times. Cortana manipulated the results just enough to conceal anything unusual about my brain while still allowing him to diagnose me properly.

Two cracked ribs, strained muscles, severe bruising, and enough general trauma to make breathing painful for the next several days. Vik told me to rest.

Cortana agreed.

Lucy agreed.

V agreed.

Jackie, who arrived halfway through the examination after Misty called him, did not agree. He wanted names. Then he wanted addresses. Then he wanted guns.

Vik threatened to sedate him.

The only reason Jackie didn't immediately start a war with Arasaka was because V pulled him aside and explained that Jenkins had orchestrated the attack. She didn't tell him about Cortana or the stolen AV, but she told him enough to make it clear that charging into Arasaka Tower would end badly.

Jackie still looked ready to try. He finally settled for taking me home. Which was how I ended up sitting at the kitchen table in the Welles family apartment, *wishing I had let an Arasaka soldier finish the job.*

The apartment had never felt smaller. I sat on one side of the old wooden table with my ribs wrapped beneath a clean shirt.

V and Lucy sat across from me.

Both women looked more nervous than I had ever seen them. That was saying something. They sat rigidly in two mismatched wooden chairs, waiting for Mama Welles to speak.

Jackie lounged across the couch with one arm stretched along the backrest. He was enjoying himself. There was no attempt to hide it. He wore a shit-eating grin so wide that I briefly considered throwing something at him.

“The ceramic fruit bowl would be ineffective,” Cortana advised.

I wasn't gonna throw the fruit bowl!

“You were looking at it for too long.”

Jackie noticed me glaring. He winked.

V sat with perfect posture. It was the sort of posture designed to project confidence during an executive interrogation. Her hands rested calmly in her lap, and her expression was composed. Only the tapping of one finger against her thigh betrayed her.

Lucy had tucked both hands beneath the table. Her shoulders were tense, and her eyes kept flicking toward the nearest exit.

Mama Welles stood at the head of the table. Her gaze moved from V to Lucy. Then back again.

Neither woman spoke.

I had never seen V surrender control of a conversation so completely.

Mama looked at me next. Her eyes softened for half a second when they passed over the bruising near my collar. Then she remembered why we were all sitting there, and the judgment returned at full strength.

I lowered my gaze. This was not my fault. At least, it was not entirely my fault.

Mama Welles placed both palms on the table.

The quiet thump made Lucy flinch.

Jackie's grin widened.

Mama stared at V first. V had known her for years. She had helped secure my place at Arasaka Academy, visited the apartment, and shared drinks with Jackie at the Coyote. None of that seemed to offer her any protection now.

Mama's gaze shifted to Lucy. Lucy looked as if she would rather fight another squad of Arasaka soldiers.

Then Mama looked between them. "So," she said slowly. "**Both of you** wish to date my son, do you...?"

– David Martinez –

David Martinez had been having a bad day.

It started with the rent. He had thought paying it would make Gloria happy.

That was what responsible sons did, wasn't it? They helped. They saw their mother coming home from another double shift with dark circles beneath her eyes and dried blood on her EMT jacket, and they did something about it.

For once, David had enough eddies to do something.

Regina's scav gig had paid better than he expected. More than he could have earned in months of saving whatever little Gloria gave him for food and transportation. His first instinct had been to buy better gear. Rebecca had already sent him links to five different guns, three armored jackets, and something called a "grenade bouquet" that David was almost certain she had invented.

Then he saw the rent notice. It felt good to pay it.

For nearly six full hours, David had been proud of himself.

Then Gloria came home. She stood in the middle of their apartment wearing her EMT uniform, her hair tied back and exhaustion lining her face. A translucent payment receipt hovered above her agent.

David had expected relief. He got an interrogation instead.

"Where did you get the money?"

"Morning to you too, Ma."

“David.” He knew that tone. Gloria used it when she already suspected the answer was bad and was giving him one chance to prove her wrong.

David sat at the counter with a bowl of synthetic cereal turning soggy in front of him. “I paid the rent.”

“I can see that.”

“You’re welcome?”

Gloria’s expression didn’t move. “Where did you get the money?”

David looked down at his cereal. The cheap flakes had absorbed enough synthetic milk to become a single beige mass. He pushed them around with his spoon. “I earned it.”

“Doing what?”

“Work.”

“What kind of work?”

“The kind that pays?” He sank lower in his chair. Why couldn’t she just be happy?

The rent was paid. They wouldn’t receive another warning from the building manager. Gloria could stop checking their account every night while pretending she was only reading messages.

He had helped. That was supposed to be good.

“Are you selling drugs?” she asked.

David nearly dropped his spoon. “WHAT? NO!”

“...Braindances?”

“No.” Not anymore at least...

“Stolen implants?”

“Ma!”

“I’m asking.”

“Well, stop asking stupid questions.”

Her eyes narrowed.

David immediately regretted that sentence.

Gloria stepped closer and placed both hands on the counter. “You paid more than a month’s rent without telling me. You have no job, no savings, and no legitimate reason to have this many eddies. What am I supposed to think?”

“That maybe I handled something?”

“You’re seventeen.”

“I’m not a kid.”

“You are my kid.”

“That’s not the same thing.”

“It is to me.”

David looked away.

The revolver John had given him rested inside his school bag near the couch. The Nova was unloaded, exactly as John had instructed while they were off the job, with its ammunition stored in a separate pocket.

David could still feel the weapon’s recoil in his hands. He could still see the scav collapsing near the hostage room.

And Katsuo—

He shut the thought down before it finished forming.

Gloria’s voice softened. “David, look at me.”

He didn’t want to.

She waited.

Eventually, he raised his eyes.

The anger was still there, but fear lived underneath it. The same fear she carried whenever a late shift kept her away from home. The fear that Night City would find a way to take him from her while she wasn’t looking.

He hated making her feel that way. “I’m not selling drugs,” he said.

“Then tell me what happened.”

David exhaled. “I did a **gig**.”

Gloria went still. “What kind of gig?”

“A merc gig.”

Her face lost what little color it had. “David.”

“It wasn’t just me.”

“That is not the point!”

“I went with friends.”

“Which friends?”

“John and Rebecca.”

Gloria knew who John was. David had told her about the academy fight, though he had left out several details. He had also mentioned the stolen-car job after John warned him not to tell his mother, mostly because keeping secrets from Gloria had never been one of his talents.

Rebecca was harder to explain.

Gloria stared at him. “John Welles?”

“Yeah.”

“The boy who was expelled after fighting Katsuo Tanaka?”

“He got expelled for protecting me.”

“And now he’s taking you on mercenary jobs?”

“He wasn’t *taking* me anywhere. He asked if I wanted to help.”

“That is worse!”

“It was a Regina Jones gig,” David said, as if the fixer’s name made everything responsible and professional. “Real contract. Real payout.”

“What did you do?”

He hesitated.

Gloria saw it. “What did you do, David?”

“Some scavs had people trapped in a clinic.”

Her hands curled against the counter. “Scavs.”

“We got the hostages out.”

"YOU FOUGHT SCAVS?"

"Yeah."

"With what?"

David's gaze flicked toward his school bag.

Gloria followed it. Her eyes locked onto the shape hidden beneath the half-closed flap. "David. Do you have a gun in there?"

"It's unloaded."

She crossed the apartment before he could stand, yanked the bag open, and pulled out the Nova. The revolver looked enormous in her hand. For several seconds, Gloria only stared at it. Then she faced him. "Where did you get this?"

"John gave it to me."

"He gave you a gun!?"

"For the gig."

"Why did you need a gun?"

"They were scavs!" The words came out louder than he intended.

Gloria flinched.

David stood. "We saved four people, Ma. Four. They would've been cut apart for their implants if we hadn't gone in."

"You could have been killed."

"But I wasn't!"

"That does not make it okay!"

"It was better than wasting another day at that dumb academy!"

The apartment went silent.

Gloria looked as though he had struck her.

David felt the guilt immediately, but his frustration was already moving too quickly to stop. "You know what that place is like," he continued. "Nobody cares if I learn anything. They just want me to know I'm poorer than everyone else."

"I am working to give you an opportunity."

"An opportunity to do what? Work for Arasaka?"

"To have a future!"

"Katsuo had a future. And look how that turned out for him! His father died, and Arasaka threw him away before the body was cold. They locked his accounts. Shut down his chrome. His friends stopped talking to him." He didn't mention finding Katsuo inside the scav den. He didn't mention the gun in Katsuo's hand or the way John's shot had sprayed blood across David's face. He definitely didn't mention that Katsuo was dead. "Corpos don't care about their own people," David said. "Why would they ever care about us?"

Gloria placed the Nova on the counter. "Get dressed."

David blinked. "What?"

"You're going to school."

"Ma—"

"I am driving you."

"I can take the train."

"No." Her voice allowed no argument. "I'm taking you to the academy personally. I will watch you walk through those doors, and I will be there when classes end to pick you up."

"You have work."

"I'll make time."

"You can't just—"

"And until I decide otherwise, you are not going *anywhere* with John or this Rebecca girl."

David stared at her. "That's not fair."

"You skipped school to fight scavs."

"We helped people."

"You risked your life."

"So do you!"

That stopped her.

David gestured toward her EMT jacket. “You drive into shootouts and gang fights all the time. You scrape people off the street while they’re still shooting at each other. How is that different?”

“I am an adult.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“I have training.”

“And yet my one gig paid more than your whole shift for a month!” He regretted it before he finished saying it.

Pain flickered across Gloria’s face. She looked away.

David wanted to apologize, but the words got stuck behind his pride.

When she looked at him again, the anger had drained away. That was worse. “You are going to have a good life,” she said quietly. “You’re going to finish the academy, find a position with a corporation, and never have to do the things I do to survive.”

David didn’t have it in him to tell her that *good life* and *working for a corporation* were a contradiction. Not after the way he had already hurt her. So he got dressed.

Gloria drove him to Arasaka Academy personally. She waited until he passed through the security gate, then called to remind him that she would return at the end of the day. David gave her a dismissive wave and pretended not to notice the relief on her face when he entered the building.

The day dragged.

Every classroom felt smaller than the last.

The lectures blurred into one another, corporate jurisdiction, market exploitation, organizational loyalty, executive accountability. The academy presented obedience as ambition and servitude as success. Every lesson seemed built to convince students they should feel grateful for the privilege of becoming replaceable parts in Arasaka’s machinery.

David thought about the gig instead. He thought about Rebecca laughing as gunfire tore through the clinic. He thought about John trying to sound like an experienced crew leader when he was almost as nervous as David. He thought about the hostages climbing into Regina’s extraction van alive.

That had felt real. Terrifying, bloody, and horrible—but real.

Nothing at the academy did.

When classes finally ended, David joined the stream of students leaving through the front gates. Luxury vehicles waited along the curb, their windows dark and their engines nearly silent. Chauffeurs stood beside polished doors while security drones hovered overhead.

David stopped near the edge of the pickup zone. Several students looked at him. He knew what they saw. David Martinez, waiting for his mother like a child. He shoved both hands into his jacket pockets and tried not to care.

Gloria arrived eleven minutes later in her battered little car. Its brakes squealed when she stopped at the curb. David climbed into the passenger seat before anyone could comment.

Gloria sighed. "Seat belt."

He pulled it across his chest.

She waited until it clicked before merging into traffic. For the first several minutes, neither of them spoke.

Night City moved around them in streaks of concrete and light. Elevated highways curved between towers while advertisements crawled across the sides of buildings. Traffic thickened as workers poured out of corporate centers and schools released their students.

David rested one hand against his school bag.

The Nova was inside again.

Gloria had returned it before they left the apartment, but only after making him swear it would remain unloaded and hidden. He had agreed.

Then he loaded it in the academy bathroom. He felt guilty about lying. Not guilty enough to travel through Night City unarmed.

Gloria glanced toward him. "I'm proud of you for wanting to help with the rent."

David looked at her. "You have a strange way of showing it."

Her attention remained on the road. "I'm not proud of how you got the money."

"We saved people."

"I know."

"So it wasn't all bad."

"No," she admitted. "It wasn't all bad."

That was probably the closest either of them would get to an apology.

David relaxed slightly.

They entered a wider stretch of highway running between industrial towers. The evening traffic thinned enough for Gloria to gain speed. A black corporate limousine approached from behind in the lane to their right.

Its windows were opaque. The bodywork shone beneath the highway lights, every scratch-resistant panel freshly polished. A small corporate security emblem glowed near its rear plate.

David watched it draw alongside them. "Think whoever's in there worries about rent?" he asked.

Gloria gave him a tired look. "Don't start."

"I'm just asking."

"You're never just asking."

The limousine began to pass.

David leaned his head against the window. For one quiet moment, everything felt almost normal.

Then tires screeched behind them!

David looked toward the side mirror. Another vehicle raced up the lane to their left. It was a broad, heavily modified Thorton with reinforced wheels and crude armor welded over its doors. The engine roared as it accelerated, closing the distance far too quickly.

Something was wrong.

"Ma—"

The Thorton swerved alongside them. Its side door flew open.

David saw bodies packed inside.

Huge bodies. Muscles swollen beyond natural proportions. Chrome buried in thick arms and shaved skulls. Purple gang markings painted across armored vests. They were members of the infamous gang, the **Animals**.

One of them leaned out of the open door. Then another. Then three more. All of them carried *machine guns*. Their weapons pointed directly at the corporate limousine on the other side of his mother's car. David and his mother were between them.

The Animals opened fire...

xxx