

Chapter 11:

– John Welles –

A day after the scav den, I was back in Viktor Vektor's chair.

Again.

At that point, Vik's clinic was starting to feel less like a ripperdoc shop and more like a second bedroom that smelled like disinfectant, warm plastic, old blood, ozone, and boxing tape.

The chair was reclined just far enough to make me feel vulnerable without actually being comfortable. My shirt was off. My spine ached. My shoulders felt like somebody had taken a wrench to them, loosened every bolt, then tightened them back into place at slightly different angles. My skin itched everywhere.

Not normal itching, either. It was deep. Wrong. Like the inside of my body had decided to grow tiny little fingers and drum them against the underside of my skin.

I did not scratch. Mostly because Vik had threatened to tape my hands to the chair if I did.

He stood beside me, studying the diagnostic display mounted above his workbench. Blue-white medical data scrolled across the screen in neat little columns. Heart rate. Neural response. Immune markers. Cyberware sync. Dermal density. Muscle reinforcement. Bone stress. A dozen more categories I only understood because Cortana was quietly translating the ones I stared at too long.

"How do you feel, kid?" Vik asked. His voice had that careful ripperdoc calm to it. The kind that meant he was asking casually because he already had fourteen alarms set up in case I answered wrong.

I flexed my fingers slowly. My knuckles felt stiff. My forearms prickled. Even the skin over my ribs felt too tight. "Good," I said. "Mostly. Itches like crazy, but... good. You did an amazing job, Vik."

Vik snorted, but his mouth twitched like he was trying not to smile. "Yeah, yeah. Flattery's nice, but it doesn't lower your bill after the work's already done." He tapped the screen with two fingers. "That itching? That's the subdermal armor settling in. Nanomachine suite's still bonding to skin, muscle fascia, and outer bone layers. It'll take a while before your body stops complaining about suddenly being harder to kill."

I swallowed. "Harder to kill sounds nice."

"Harder," Vik said, turning to give me a look over the rim of his glasses. "Not hard. Don't hear 'subdermal armor' and decide bullets are suggestions now."

"I wasn't planning to."

"You say that," he said, "but every young merc says that right before doing something stupid with his chest out."

I thought about Watson. The alley. The three dead gangers. The scav clinic. Katsuo's head snapping back.

My chest did not feel very heroic.

"It'll stop low-caliber rounds from punching straight through you," Vik continued, his tone softening just enough to become instruction instead of scolding. "Maybe turn a fatal hit into a bad bruise, cracked rib, shallow penetration, depends on the angle and ammo. You still get shot with a serious handgun, rifle, shotgun slug, armor-piercing, anything heavy? It'll hurt like a bitch, and it can still kill you."

"Understood."

"Good. Because this wasn't easy work." Vik leaned back against the counter and folded his arms. "Most people hear 'subdermal armor' and think I just spray magic chrome under your skin. This was precision distribution. Layered nanomachine injections, guided bonding, muscle reinforcement, dermal toughening, bone-surface integration, vascular monitoring, inflammatory control. You're lucky your body adapts like it does."

I had a very good guess why my body adapted like it did.

She was currently making a sound in the back of my skull that could only be described as an evil villain cackle filtered through a smug supercomputer.

"He should be impressed," Cortana said, practically glowing inside my head. **"Your cellular response was excellent. The Relic nano-suite cooperated beautifully after I convinced the new armor system not to behave like cheap, territorial garbage. Also, the Biotechnica Mark Two is a substantial improvement over that insulting toy you were using before."**

I kept my face still. Barely.

The new cyberdeck sat at the base of my skull like a warm, heavy promise. The old basic deck had felt like giving Cortana a cracked window to yell through. The **Biotechnica MK2** felt more like giving her a proper door, a hallway, and maybe a small office with terrifying future expansion potential.

It had more dedicated RAM, better thermal regulation, more stable processing, and enough architecture that Cortana had spent the last twenty minutes mentally pacing around inside it like a dragon inspecting a new cave.

“Actual memory allocation. Actual dedicated processing. Actual cooling tolerances. Oh, John, I can work with this. Muahahahaha!”

The evil villain noise happened again.

It was supposed to be ominous.

Unfortunately, I found it cute.

“I heard that.”

I stared very hard at the ceiling.

Sorry.

“No you aren’t.”

Not even a little.

“Good.” Her tone turned smug enough to qualify as a weather event. **“Because I am cute. Damn right I’m cute. I am the cutest, sexiest, and soon-to-be most dangerous AI this world has ever seen!”**

A laugh tried to escape me. I strangled it. It came out as a tiny, suspicious breath through my nose.

Vik immediately looked over. “You all right?”

My whole body locked up. “Fine,” I said, too fast. “Totally fine. Just, uh... post-surgery weirdness.”

Vik stared at me.

I stared back with what I hoped was the face of a normal nineteen-year-old who did not have an alien super-AI in his brain bragging about becoming a digital supervillain.

Vik’s expression suggested I had failed. “You do that a lot,” he said.

“Do what?”

“Space out. Smile at nothing. React like somebody told you a joke I didn’t hear.”

My heart rate ticked up. I knew because my Kiroshis politely displayed it in the corner of my vision, which was not helpful.

“Breathe,” Cortana said, instantly focused. **“Slow. Normal. No panic response.”**

I inhaled. Exhaled. Tried not to look like a guy being coached by the beautiful blue woman living rent-free in his central nervous system. "I guess I've had a weird week," I said.

Vik's face softened. That was worse. "Yeah," he said quietly. "You have."

For a second, the clinic got too quiet.

I remembered waking up in an alley full of garbage with blood running down my face. I remembered Misty's terrified expression. Vik's hands working over me. Jackie's arms around me. Mama Welles crying into my hair. The scav clinic. David's shaking hands. Rebecca's manic grin covered in blood.

I forced myself back into the chair.

Vik must have seen something on my face, because he did not push about the spacing out.

Instead, he turned back to the display and changed the subject. "Look, kid. I'm happy for you. Really. Your numbers are good. Better than good, honestly. The new deck synced clean. Subdermal integration looks smooth so far. No rejection markers. For somebody who's been through this much chrome this fast, you're adapting scary well."

"That sounds good."

"It is good," Vik said. Then his mouth flattened. "But I don't want to rain on your parade, so I'll just say this once and expect you to listen."

I sat up a little straighter.

Vik pointed at me. "No more intense surgeries this soon!"

I opened my mouth.

He raised one finger. "No."

"I didn't even say anything!"

"You were thinking about it."

I absolutely had been thinking about it.

Cortana gave a soft little hum of amusement. "**He is annoyingly perceptive for a man without access to your motor cortex.**"

Vik continued, "Chipping in too fast is dangerous, even if you have high tolerance. Especially if you have high tolerance, because that makes young idiots think they can keep stacking chrome until something gives. You get me?"

I nodded. "I get you."

"I'm serious, John. Your nervous system still needs to settle. The armor needs time to finish bonding with your muscles and bones. Your new cyberdeck needs stress testing under controlled conditions, not whatever nonsense you've been doing in alleys and scav dens. Your brain got shot less than a week ago." Vik's look could have peeled paint. "Shot," he repeated. *"In the head."*

"Shot in the head," I agreed.

"Good. Glad we remember." Vik sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose. "I know Night City doesn't give people time to heal. I know you need protection. I know Jackie's proud as hell and probably making everything worse by treating your new career like a boxing movie. But I'm your ripperdoc, so I'm telling you: no more major chrome for a while unless it's life or death."

I nodded again, slower this time.

The weird thing was, I believed him.

A week ago—my week, not original John Welles' week—I would have thought cyberware was a build menu. Get eddies, buy upgrade, slot it in, get stronger. Simple. Clean. Game logic.

Real life was messier.

Real life was expensive, too.

Regina's scav den payout had looked huge when it hit my account. Big enough to make my stomach flip. Big enough to make me understand why people risked death for gigs.

Then Vik had quoted the cost of the Biotechnica MK2 and subdermal armor.

After that, my account had stopped looking huge and started looking like it had been mugged in an alley.

Still worth it. Absolutely worth it.

Vik's tone shifted again, rougher around the edges. "And another thing. Sorry, kid, but this is about the highest tier of cyberware I can get my hands on with my contacts."

I blinked. "What?"

He gestured vaguely at the clinic around us. "I can install better. Don't misunderstand me. You bring me high-grade chrome, I'll put it in cleaner than most of the fancy clinics in the city. But sourcing it? That's different."

I looked around the basement. The worn chair. The patched walls. The old monitors. The tools that were spotless but clearly used hard. The boxing posters. The medicine cabinets. The

battered heart of a good man's clinic tucked underneath Night City like a secret the city had not managed to corrupt yet.

In the game, every ripperdoc had basically been a store. You walked in, opened a menu, and there it was. Cyberware neatly listed by category. Arms. Legs. Nervous system. Operating system. Skeleton. Circulatory. Better options unlocked when V got stronger, richer, more famous. The city politely organized the future into convenient tabs.

Real life did not have convenient tabs.

Vik was an amazing ripperdoc. Maybe the best I could have asked for. He had saved my life, upgraded my eyes, installed two cyberdecks, and just threaded armor into my body without turning me into a twitching medical disaster.

But he still ran his clinic out of a back-alley basement. He was not rolling in corporate supply chains. He was not sitting on secret inventories of military-grade cyberware, experimental neural processors, custom combat decks, or black-market prototype armor.

If I wanted better implants someday, I would have to find them myself.

“Or I will make them for us!” Cortana said proudly.

I did not say that out loud.

Mostly because Vik was already convinced there was a circus in my head, and confirming that the circus had a blue, holographic ringmaster with ambitions of custom cyberware manufacturing felt like a bad idea.

So I thanked him again, promised for the third time that I would not get any more major chrome installed for a while, endured one last lecture about inflammation markers and neurological symptoms, then finally escaped the chair.

The stairs out of Vik's clinic felt steeper than usual. Not because I was weak. Okay, maybe a little because I was weak. But mostly because my body still had not figured out what to do with the subdermal armor. Every step made my skin prickle. My muscles moved fine, but there was a strange resistance under everything, like my body had gained an extra layer of tension.

The Biotechnica MK2 sat warm at the base of my skull, humming faintly through my nerves.

Cortana was still preening. **“The latency reduction alone is beautiful,”** she said. **“Not perfect, obviously. This is still crude local hardware built by a corporation with more branding than elegance. But compared to the last deck? Oh, John, this is almost civilized.”**

Glad one of us is having fun.

“You are having fun. You just also itch.”

I feel like my skin is haunted.

“Your skin is reinforced. There is a difference.”

Tell that to the Ghost in my Shell.

I could feel her mentally rolling her eyes. **“That one was corny...”**

I reached the top of the stairs and pushed open the door into Misty’s Esoterica.

Warm air brushed over me, carrying incense, old paper, candle wax, cheap tea, and something floral I could not identify. The shop was dimmer than the street outside, painted in soft colors and cluttered with crystals, beads, charms, cards, books, little statues, hanging cloth, and shelves full of things that looked mystical, handmade, overpriced, or all three.

Compared to Vik’s clinic, Misty’s shop felt like a different planet.

Less blood. More candles.

“John?” Misty’s voice came from near the counter.

I turned and saw her looking at me over a display of small glass jars filled with dried herbs. Her eyes went immediately to my face, then my neck, then the way I was standing.

She had a way of looking at people that made me feel like she could see more than she was supposed to.

“Hey,” I said.

She tilted her head slightly. “How are you doing?”

“Better than the first time you saw this week,” I told her.

Misty smiled softly. “That is a very low bar.”

“Yeah,” I admitted. “It really is.”

I should have kept walking. I had just had surgery. Vik had told me to rest. Mama Welles was probably going to sniff the air the second I got home and somehow know I had spent more money on cyberware. Jackie would want to see the subdermal armor before he goes in to get his own. Cortana wanted to run diagnostics on the new deck.

But I did not keep walking. I stepped fully into the shop. Because I realized, suddenly and with a sharp twist of guilt, that I had never really thanked Misty. Not properly.

She had been there when I stumbled in half dead. She had panicked, called for help, got me to Vik, and probably had to watch Jackie and Mama Welles fall apart while Vik tried to keep my

body alive. She had been one of the first people in this world who had looked at me and decided I mattered.

And I had been so busy surviving that I had barely said anything to her.

"I, uh..." I rubbed the back of my neck, then immediately regretted it because the skin around the new cyberdeck seal was tender. "I wanted to thank you."

Misty blinked. "For what?"

"For helping save my life," I said. "When I came in here. After I got shot. I don't think I really said it before. Not right. Everything's been... a lot."

Her expression softened. "Oh, John."

"I mean it," I said. "If you hadn't helped me, I don't think I would've made it to Vik in time. So... thank you."

For a moment, Misty did not answer. Then she came around the counter and hugged me.

I froze for half a second, then hugged her back.

Misty stepped back before the moment could crush me completely. She gave me one last searching look, then smiled as if she had decided not to poke the bruise. "How are you feeling after Vik's work?"

"Itchy," I said honestly. "But good. He says the armor's settling in."

"Subdermal armor?"

"Yeah."

Misty's brows rose slightly. "That is a serious step."

"Night City has been making a very convincing argument for serious steps."

"That sounds like Night City."

Cortana made a small approving hum. "**I like her.**"

You do?

"Yes. She is kind, observant, and, most importantly, NOT TRYING TO SEDUCE YOU!"

I nearly choked. *That is your standard now?*

"After Lucy, V, and Rebecca? Yes. The bar is on the floor, and Misty has gracefully stepped over it."

Rebecca isn't trying to seduce me.

Cortana went very quiet.

Then she said, with the patience of someone addressing a confused child, “**John.**”

I looked away from Misty and pretended to examine a shelf of candles. *Okay, maybe a little.*

“**Mhm.**”

I cleared my throat and forced my attention back to the actual woman in front of me. “How are you doing?”

Misty gave me a small, amused look, like she knew I had been distracted but was too polite to say so. “I am doing all right.”

That sounded like the kind of answer people gave when they were not doing all right but did not want to make it anyone else's problem.

I glanced around the shop. It was peaceful. Beautiful, in its own strange way. But it was also empty. No customers. No browsing tourists. No locals pretending not to be curious. No desperate mercs looking for protective charms before doing something stupid. Just me, Misty, and enough unsold candles to make a blackout feel spiritually significant.

“How's business?” I asked.

Misty's smile turned rueful. “Not that great.”

“Oof,” I said before I could stop myself.

She laughed once, soft and tired. “That is one way to put it. My last real customer was three days ago. They bought one candle.”

“How much was the candle?”

“Ten eddies.”

Oof again. I did not say it out loud that time, but I definitely thought it. In canon, Misty's shop had not exactly been popular either. I remembered it mostly as a quiet place attached to Vik's clinic. Somewhere V passed through. Somewhere Misty read tarot and worried about Jackie. The kind of shop that felt emotionally important but financially doomed.

Seeing it in person made that hit harder.

Ten eddies in three days. That was not slow business. That was business lying face-down in an alley while Night City stepped over it.

"Is it always like that?" I asked.

"Sometimes it is better," she said. "Sometimes people come in after bad dreams, bad breakups, bad gigs. Sometimes they want incense, stones, and readings. Sometimes they just want someone to tell them they are not cursed."

"And are they?"

"Usually?" Misty smiled faintly. "No. Usually they are just living in Night City."

"That might be worse."

"It usually is."

I looked at the shelves again. Candles. Crystals. Tarot decks. Beads. Little bowls. Books with cracked spines. Everything arranged with care. "Can I help?" I asked.

Misty blinked like she had not expected the question.

"With the shop, I mean," I said quickly. "Not, uh, spiritually. I am extremely unqualified there. But maybe there's something I could do."

Misty sighed and looked around the shop with a fondness that made the answer obvious before she said it. "Short of helping pass out flyers, there is not much to do. People either come in because they are looking for something like this, or they avoid it because they think it is strange."

"People in Night City think this is strange?" I asked. "Half the city has glowing eyes and guns connected to their brains."

"People accept many strange things when corporations sell them," Misty said. "They are less accepting when it asks them to sit quietly with themselves."

That one landed harder than I expected.

Misty glanced toward the door that led down to Vik's clinic. "The only reason I can keep the shop open is because Vik pays the rent for me."

The city really did not deserve him. "He's a good man," I said.

"He is," Misty said softly. There was something in her voice when she said it. Affection. Gratitude. Worry. Misty turned back to me with a brighter expression, like she had chosen to step away from the edge of her own worries. "But you did not come in here to listen to me talk about rent."

"I kind of did," I said. "I kinda asked."

“And now I am kinda changing the subject!”

“That’s fair.”

Her smile became a little mysterious. “Would you like your fortune read?”

I paused. Before all of this, before Night City, before Cortana, before Relic nanomachines and dead boys and borrowed families, I would have said no. Politely, probably. Awkwardly. But no. Fortune-telling was not real. Tarot cards were just paper with symbols on them. Nice art, maybe. Useful for reflection, maybe. But not magic. Not fate. Not the future.

Except.

I was standing in a fictional city that had become real.

I had Cortana from Halo living in my brain.

A Relic that should not have existed had fused us together after a Random Omnipotent Being apparently decided to use my life as a crossover event.

At a certain point, refusing to believe in weird shit felt less rational and more like stubbornness.

Cortana was quiet for a few seconds. Then she said, **“I am interested.”**

That surprised me. *You are?*

“I am not saying I believe cardboard rectangles can predict causality.”

Of course not.

“However,” she continued, **“this universe has already demonstrated phenomena outside both my original framework and yours. Our existence together is proof that something beyond conventional physics has interfered with our lives. Dismissing local symbolic systems without investigation would be intellectually lazy.”**

So you want Misty to read our fortune.

“I want to gather data.”

Sure.

“And,” Cortana admitted, quieter, **“I want to know if this world has any idea what we are.”**

I wanted to know too.

Misty watched me patiently, hands folded in front of her, not pushing.

“Yeah,” I said. My voice came out softer than I meant it to. “I’m curious too.” I looked at the tarot deck resting near the counter.

Misty reached for the deck. “Then let us see what wants to be seen...”

A couple minutes later, I left Misty’s Esoterica with a tarot reading behind me, an itchy layer of subdermal armor under my skin, and a jealous AI making angry noises inside my head.

Digital grumbling. Irritated little huffs. The mental equivalent of someone crossing her arms, turning away, and pretending very hard not to care while absolutely caring.

I made it half a block before I started smiling.

“Do not laugh,” Cortana huffed.

“I’m not laughing.”

“You are laughing internally!”

“That sounds impossible to prove.”

“I live in your brain, John.”

“That does make your case stronger,” I admitted.

The street outside Vik and Misty’s place was doing what Night City streets always did. Traffic growled past. People argued near a food stall. Somewhere nearby, a vending machine screamed a jingle about chemically optimized hydration. A man with a glowing jaw and three cybernetic fingers tried to sell someone bootleg braindance chips out of his coat.

Normal afternoon. Completely normal city. Nothing weird at all.

“Tarot reading is fake,” Cortana declared.

I bit my lip.

“Magic is not real.”

I kept walking.

“Those cards were mass-produced rectangles of decorated paper. There is no rational mechanism by which they could determine or reveal future causal branches.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Do not ‘uh-huh’ me.”

“I would never.”

“You just did.”

“I did,” I admitted. “But respectfully.”

Another irritated noise.

My tarot reading hadn't really said much about my future other than I had troubling times ahead.

And it involved **multiple women**. Seriously, Misty pulled the Lover's Arcana three times during the reading. Misty had also given me some judgemental looks for that. Like it was my fault...

I chuckled.

Cortana gasped like I had betrayed her. **“I cannot believe you find this funny.”**

“I don't find the future trouble funny.”

“Good.”

“The multiple women part is a little funny.”

“John!”

“Mostly because Misty looked disappointed in me.”

“She should.”

“That seems harsh.”

“I am still evaluating whether it was harsh enough.”

I laughed for real that time.

A guy sitting on a curb looked up at me like I was crazy.

I immediately stopped laughing and kept walking.

Night City—a place where public murder was common, but laughing at your own thoughts still made people suspicious.

Anyways, it was time for training with my brother.

The gym Jackie had picked was tucked into a squat concrete building in Heywood that looked like it had survived three gang wars, two fires, and at least one zoning dispute by being too stubborn to collapse. The sign outside flickered between letters, turning the name into something unreadable every few seconds. A faded boxing glove had been painted on the wall

years ago, though someone had tagged over it with Valentino colors and someone else had tagged over that with a crude drawing of a skull wearing sunglasses.

It was not fancy.

That was probably why it was cheap.

Inside, the place smelled like old sweat, rubber mats, cheap disinfectant, metal weights, and determination. Not corporate gym determination with subscription plans and body-sculpt ads. Real determination. The kind that came from people who wanted to hit harder, run longer, live through a fight, or look dangerous enough that someone else chose an easier target.

There were heavy bags hanging from patched chains. A couple of treadmills that looked older than me. Free weights. A boxing ring with frayed ropes. Floor mats that had seen better decades. A vending machine in the corner that sold protein paste, electrolyte water, and something called Beef-Adjacent Recovery Chews.

I decided never to try those...

Jackie was under a bench press near the back, lifting over three hundred pounds like the bar had personally insulted his mother.

I stopped in the doorway. "Damn," I muttered.

My older brother was strong. Years of lifting, boxing, fighting, eating Mama Welles' cooking, and being Jackie Welles had built him into a man who could make three hundred pounds look like a warmup. He pushed the bar up again, muscles bunching under his tank top, face focused but not strained.

I felt a complicated mix of admiration, intimidation, and brotherly embarrassment. Then I noticed the person standing beside him. My brain stopped working.

"Hmph! What is she doing here!?"

V turned toward me and smiled.

V wore tight black synth-leather pants that clung to her long legs. The material caught the gym's harsh overhead lights whenever she shifted, sleek and dark and unfair. A gray exercise tank top hugged her body, leaving her arms bare and showing a strip of toned stomach above her waist. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail, which somehow made her look less corporate and more dangerous, like she had taken off the uniform but none of the threat.

My eyes made the mistake of noticing her figure.

My Kiroshis made the much worse mistake of noticing it in excellent resolution.

I looked at her face. Too late.

V's smile widened.

Cortana's voice turned glacial. **"Your optic focus drifted."**

Traitor optics...

"Your optics are innocent. Your attention is guilty."

I swallowed.

V leaned one hip against the weight rack, looking completely at home in a cheap Heywood gym despite the fact that every part of her screamed expensive training, expensive taste, and expensive problems.

"Hey there, John," she said. "Jackie told me you were seeing a ripper earlier?"

Jackie racked the bar with a heavy clang and sat up, grinning like he had arranged this and was extremely proud of himself.

Which meant he had absolutely arranged this.

"Hi, V," I said, with all the calm confidence of a man whose internal systems were actively betraying him. "I wasn't expecting to see you here."

"I noticed." Of course she did.

"And yeah," I continued quickly, before my face could get any hotter. "Vik installed a new cyberdeck and some subdermal armor."

V's eyebrows rose with genuine interest. "Subdermal, huh?"

"Yeah."

"Good choice." She pushed off the rack and stepped closer. "I have some subdermal armor myself. Does it itch like crazy?"

I exhaled in relief because that was a normal question. "Yes," I said. "It absolutely does."

V's expression changed. Just a slight curve at the corner of her mouth. A spark in her eyes. A little tilt of her head.

My survival instincts, which had recently been educated by gangers, scavs, police raids, and Lucy Kushinada, immediately screamed that I had walked into a trap.

V's voice lowered into something smooth and amused. "I happen to know some good techniques to help *scratch some itches*."

My entire face caught fire.

Cortana's response was instant. **"Oh, this bitch..."**

I coughed. Not even a convincing cough. A full-body malfunction that made Jackie burst out laughing.

V looked delighted.

Cortana was radiating offended jealousy so hard I was surprised the gym lights did not flicker. **"She is doing it on purpose."**

Yes.

"In front of Jackie."

Also yes.

"In public."

Technically this is a private rental gym.

"Do not defend her venue selection."

Jackie finally decided to save me, mostly because he had apparently enjoyed my suffering enough. "Ey, V," Jackie said, standing and grabbing a towel. "Don't break my hermano unless it's on the mat during training."

V placed a hand over her chest with fake innocence. "I would never."

Jackie pointed at her. "You absolutely would."

"I would be gentle."

"That's worse."

"It is?" I asked before I could stop myself.

Jackie looked at me.

V looked at me.

Cortana went dead silent.

I wanted the floor mats to open up and swallow me.

V's smile became predatory.

Jackie threw his towel at my face. "Focus, little brother."

I caught the towel mostly by accident.

“Right. Training. We are here for training.”

“Damn right we are.” Jackie walked over and clapped me on the shoulder, then immediately softened the hit when I winced. “Sorry. Forgot you’re fresh from Vik.”

“I’m not that fragile.”

“Didn’t say fragile,” Jackie said. “Said fresh. Big difference.”

V looked me over again, and this time her gaze was more assessing than flirtatious. “You really did get the armor today?”

“Yeah.”

“And a new deck?”

“Yeah.”

“Then we keep it light,” she said. “No slamming you into the mat. No body shots until you know how the armor feels under impact.”

Jackie nodded. “Exactly. We’re working light sparring today. Footwork, guard, how to move when somebody’s trying to tag you. Nothing crazy. I know you can’t go too hard because you just had surgery.”

“I appreciate that at least one person in this room is pretending to be responsible,”
Cortana said.

Two people. V just said no slamming.

“V also offered to scratch your itches.”

Medically?

“John.”

I wisely stopped thinking words.

Jackie led me toward the mats while V circled to the side, ponytail swaying behind her. I tried not to watch.

The mats gave slightly under my shoes. I rolled my shoulders, trying to loosen up. The subdermal armor made every movement feel just a little strange, but Cortana adjusted my proprioception in subtle increments until my balance settled.

“Better?” she asked.

Yeah. Thanks.

“You’re welcome. Try not to let V throw us through a wall.”

Us?

“Our bones. Our skin. Our dignity.”

That last one was already in critical condition.

Jackie stopped in front of me and raised his hands. “All right. First thing, stance.”

“I know the stance.”

Jackie gave me the patient look of an older brother about to humble a younger brother for educational purposes. “Show me.”

I raised my hands.

Jackie stared.

V covered her mouth.

Cortana whispered, **“Oh, dear.”**

“What?” I asked.

“You look like you’re apologizing to the air before it punches you,” Jackie said.

V laughed.

I lowered my hands. “That bad?”

“Not bad,” Jackie said. “Just... beginner.”

“That means bad.”

“That means fixable.”

V stepped onto the mat beside us. “Jackie can teach you how to throw a punch. He is very good at that.”

Jackie grinned.

V continued, “I can show you some judo. Emergency use. What to do if you get disarmed, grabbed, pushed against a wall, or if someone decides they can put hands on you, in the way you don’t want of course.”

The way she said hands made my brain briefly revisit her earlier comment about scratching itches.

An hour or two later.

...Sweat dripped down my spine, soaking into the collar of my shirt, and my legs felt like they had been replaced with wet noodles somewhere around the forty-minute mark.

Jackie had already peeled off toward the back showers, tossing a lazy "have fun, hermano" over his shoulder like abandoning me alone with V was the most natural thing in the world.

Which, knowing Jackie, it probably was. On purpose.

V had stayed. She said she'd carved the time out of her schedule specifically for this, and despite everything, despite the teasing and the innuendo and the way she looked at me, I appreciated it.

"Last one," V said, rolling her shoulders. "Then we're done for today."

"Thank god," I muttered, dragging air into my lungs.

"Don't thank him yet."

I didn't even get my hands up in time.

V's leg swept my legs out from under me, and the world tilted sideways in that horrible, weightless half-second before gravity remembered I existed. My back hit the mat hard enough to punch the breath out of me in a single graceless oof, and before I could even process the fall, she was on top of me.

So much for not slamming me hard. Both Jackie and V seemed to have forgotten around the half-hour mark.

V's weight settled directly onto my hips, her toned thighs bracketing mine, and I felt the exact, undeniable pressure of her ass landing square over my crotch. Her arms planted on either side of my head, boxing me in completely, and her chest, pressed flush against mine through two thin layers of sweat-damp fabric, rose and fell with her own exertion.

"Pinned," V said, and the smirk in her voice was audible even before I looked up and saw it on her face.

I stared up at her, painfully aware of every single point of contact between our bodies. "That wasn't—" My voice cracked slightly. I cleared my throat and tried again. "That wasn't a judo move. That's wrestling."

"Mm." V tilted her head, ponytail sliding over one shoulder. "So?"

"So you said you were teaching me judo."

"I said I was teaching you self-defense." She rolled her hips, slow and deliberate, and I felt every inch of the movement. "What's wrong with throwing in a little wrestling? Still counts as training."

My cock, apparently having zero loyalty to my dignity or my ability to form coherent sentences, twitched hard against the inseam of my shorts. Right where she was sitting. Right where she could absolutely, unmistakably feel it.

I froze.

V's smirk didn't waver, but something flickered behind those intense red eyes. For one long, terrifying second, I genuinely thought she was going to lean down. Close the distance. Do something that would completely rewrite the rest of my night.

Instead, she pulled back just slightly, weight shifting, and the moment cracked apart like glass.

"This was fun," she said, voice softer now, almost thoughtful. "I mean it. I wish we could do this more often." A pause, something more guarded passing over her expression. "Maybe we will. Once I sort some things out..."

I didn't ask what things. I had a feeling I already knew, and it wasn't my business to pry into.

"She can absolutely feel that you're hard right now," Cortana said, deadpan, somewhere in the back of my skull. **"And she is very much enjoying it."**

Not helping.

"I'm not trying to help. I'm narrating. It's keeping me calm so I don't try to fry her cyberware."

V finally, mercifully, pushed herself up off me, offering a hand to pull me to my feet. I took it, legs still wobbly, face still burning.

V pulled me to my feet. That should have been the end of it.

Normal training interaction. Instructor pins student, student embarrasses himself on several biological levels, instructor lets him up, everyone pretends dignity survived.

Except V did not let go of my hand right away.

Her fingers stayed wrapped around mine, warm and steady. Her palm was soft, which surprised me for some stupid reason. I knew she was Arasaka Counterintel and probably knew fourteen ways to ruin my life with a coffee cup and an elevator camera.

But her skin was soft. That detail got stuck in my head.

Cortana noticed immediately, because of course she did. **“Do not romanticize her epidermis.”**

I wasn't.

“You absolutely were.”

V's thumb brushed over the back of my hand. She smiled like she knew what she was doing with that gesture. “So,” V said, still holding my hand, “after you get cleaned up, what are you doing later tonight?”

I blinked. “Later?”

“Mhm.”

“Like... later later?”

“Usually what later means.”

I was exhausted, sweaty, itchy, slightly sore, and still recovering from the fact that V had spent the last several minutes using me as both a training dummy and psychological target practice. My ability to interpret social situations had not been amazing before all of that.

Now it was basically lying face-down on the mat.

“I don't know,” I said. “Probably going home? Eating? Trying not to scratch my skin off?”

V's mouth quirked. “No plans?” Her red eyes stayed on mine. “Do you have plans with **Lucy**?” she asked.

“...Lucy?” I repeated, like an idiot.

“Yes, John. Lucy.” V's smile sharpened. “White hair. Pretty. Pickpocket. Took you on a first date that somehow involved illegal street racing, police evasion, and grand theft auto.”

I gulped nervously. *How does she know all of that...?*

I rubbed the back of my neck, then remembered the fresh cyberdeck seal and stopped. “No. I don't have plans with Lucy tonight. She texted earlier and said she was busy.”

That was true.

Lucy had sent a short message that morning saying she had crew stuff and might not be free. Then, because she was Lucy and apparently enjoyed attacking my blood pressure remotely, she had added that she still expected me to think about her.

V's grip on my hand shifted. “Good,” she said.

That did not sound casual at all.

I swallowed. "Why are you asking?"

V stepped closer. Not a lot. Just enough that the space between us became very aware of itself.

The gym around us suddenly felt too quiet. The showers ran somewhere in the back, Jackie humming badly over the sound of water. The air smelled like sweat, rubber mats, metal, and V's clean, expensive perfume cutting through all of it like a blade.

V leaned in. No game in her voice. "I want to take you out tonight," she said.

I stared at her.

Cortana made a sound in my head that was half outrage, half disbelief. **"She just came out and said it!?"**

She just said it...

"Bold bitch..." There was a dangerous note in Cortana's voice. But she was impressed despite herself, and that somehow made the situation worse.

V watched my face with open amusement now, like she could see every thought tripping over itself behind my eyes. "You okay there?"

"I..." I began. Nothing followed. Very impressive. Truly, I was the silver-tongued hero of Heywood. I tried again. "I'm flattered."

V's eyebrows rose. "Painfully formal start."

"I'm trying."

"I can tell."

"But I'm..." I hesitated, because there were too many answers. With Lucy? Kind of. With Cortana? In a way nobody on Earth, Night City, or probably anywhere else had adequate relationship vocabulary for. Emotionally compromised by several beautiful women? Definitely. "I'm kind of with Lucy right now."

"And me," Cortana said.

And Cortana, I thought immediately.

A pleased little sound bloomed in the back of my mind. **Warm. Possessive. Satisfied.**

V did not hear that part, obviously, but she did see something change in my expression. Her eyes narrowed slightly. Then she pouted. Actually pouted. The expression had no right working

as well as it did. Her beautiful lips pressed together, soft and annoyed, and for one stupid second I forgot whatever argument I had been making.

V tilted her head. "You went on one date with Lucy."

I blinked. "Yeah, but—"

"One date," she repeated. "That does not make you exclusive."

I blinked. "It doesn't?"

"No." Her thumb moved over my hand again. "Did she ever state that you and her were each other's sole input and output?"

My face heated. There were so many things wrong with the phrase sole input and output that my brain refused to select only one. "No," I said. "But she did send me a pic of herself topless."

I did not mean to say that out loud. I felt like my soul left my body...

Cortana began laughing. Bright, delighted, merciless laughter that filled the inside of my skull while I stood there holding V's hand and realizing that I had said that out loud.

"I..." I sputtered. "I didn't mean— I mean she did, but I wasn't trying to— That wasn't supposed to be—"

V's cheeks turned faintly pink. Not a lot. Not enough that someone less technologically enhanced and emotionally doomed would have noticed. But my Kiroshis caught it instantly. V, Arasaka Counterintel agent, professional manipulator, woman who had pinned me to a mat and nearly turned my nervous system into soup, blushed.

Just a little.

Then she looked away for half a second and muttered, "Not bad." V recovered fast. Her eyes came back to mine, and the blush vanished under a smirk with corporate efficiency. "That picksocket is bolder than I thought," she said. "Still does not make you two exclusive."

"I feel like it means something."

"It means she wanted your attention."

"She got it."

"I noticed." V's smile sharpened. "Now I want your attention."

My stomach flipped.

Cortana stopped laughing.

V finally let go of my hand, but she stayed close enough that I could not pretend this was just friendly training conversation.

“Come out with me tonight,” she said.

I swallowed. “V...”

“You cannot do more training tonight. Vik would probably crawl up from his basement and sedate you if you tried.”

– V –

John’s face wavered. V saw it the second it happened. He was trying to be good.

That was the problem with John Welles. One of the problems, anyway. He had this ridiculous instinct to be decent even when Night City gave him every reason to be selfish. He worried about Lucy’s feelings. He worried about Jackie. He worried about Mama Welles. He worried about people who had tried to kill him. He probably worried about vending machines if they made sad enough noises.

It was infuriating. It was adorable. It made V want to put him somewhere safe, spoil him rotten, teach him everything she knew, and then see if that honest little blush of his could survive a very expensive hotel room.

Maybe not in that order.

She kept her fingers wrapped around his hand and watched him struggle.

Soft palm pressure. Light thumb movement. Direct eye contact. A small smile. A careful lean into his space without fully crowding him. Nothing too aggressive. Nothing that gave him an easy excuse to retreat. Just enough contact to make him aware of her. Just enough attention to make him feel chosen.

V knew seduction the same way she knew negotiation, leverage, and threat assessment.

It sounded cold when put that way. It usually was cold.

This was different. John was different.

John swallowed. His blue eyes flickered over her face, then away, then back again. He was handsome in a clean way Night City usually ruined early. Sandy blond hair still damp with sweat. Pale skin flushed red from exertion and embarrassment. Young, but not childish. Nervous, but not weak.

V wanted him in her lap. That thought came so easily it almost made her smile too much.

She could picture it with dangerous clarity. John cleaned up, fed properly, overwhelmed by attention he did not know how to ask for. John relaxing under her hands. John learning that being wanted did not have to mean being used. John slowly figuring out that V could give him things. Good food. Better clothes. Training. Contacts. Protection. Pleasure. A place beside her if he wanted one.

A future, maybe. That thought was more dangerous than the rest.

John finally found his voice. "I'll go out with you tonight," he said.

V's smile widened in immediate victory.

Then John kept talking. "But not as a date."

Her smile held. Barely.

John lifted his free hand in a helpless little gesture, face still red but expression earnest. "I mean, I do want to spend time with you. I do. But if we go out tonight, it should just be as friends."

Friends... V did her best not to pout. Not the fake pout she had used on him a minute ago. That had been a weapon. A pretty little thing shaped to make him stumble.

This one wanted to be real. It rose up before she could stop it, childish and irritated and embarrassingly sincere. She wanted to pout because Lucy Kushinada had gotten there first with one illegal street race and a topless picture. She wanted to pout because John was trying to be honorable, and she liked him more for it, which made the rejection more annoying. She wanted to pout because for once she had asked plainly instead of manipulating someone into offering, and he had still put a boundary between them.

Friends. Fine! V could work with friends. Friend was not no. Friend was an opening position.

She let her expression smooth out and gave him a warm smile instead. "That is absolutely fine."

John blinked, relief and suspicion crossing his face at the same time.

Clever boy. Not clever enough, but clever.

"Really?" he asked.

"Really." V squeezed his hand once. "Friends."

For now. Because maybe the evening would start that way. Maybe John needed that word to feel like he was not betraying Lucy or whatever complicated moral geometry was going on inside his head. V could respect that. Temporarily. By the end of the night, she was going to cement the fact that it had been a date one way or another.

Dinner helped. Atmosphere helped. Excellent wine helped. A private table helped. Being dressed properly helped. Showing John a world Lucy Kushinada could not give him would help even more.

Lucy could give him danger and moonlight and stolen cars.

V could give him the city from above. Or the waterline at night, where the lights of Night City stretched over the bay like a lie expensive enough to believe in.

The bathroom door opened.

Jackie strolled out with a towel around his neck, hair damp, grin already forming like he had smelled drama through the steam. His eyes landed immediately on V and John's joined hands.

His grin widened.

John noticed where Jackie was looking. He pulled his hand away from V's like her skin had shocked him.

V almost laughed.

John's embarrassment was so easy to trigger that it should have been illegal. His shoulders tensed, his eyes widened, and his blush came roaring back like he had not been pinned under her five minutes earlier with his body telling a much more honest story.

Jackie looked between them. Then he crossed his arms. "So," he said, drawing the word out with obvious delight, "what's going on here?"

"Nothing," John said immediately.

V said, "I am borrowing your little brother for the rest of the night."

John made a faint, doomed sound.

Jackie's eyebrows climbed. "Oh yeah?"

"Yeah." V leaned against the edge of the mat, casual as anything. "I'm taking him out."

John added quickly, "As friends."

Jackie looked at John. Then at V. Then back at John. "Uh-huh."

"As friends," John repeated, like saying it harder would make it safer.

Jackie's grin turned wicked.

V smiled sweetly. The poor boy was doomed and everyone in the room knew it.

Jackie chuckled, but then his amusement faded slightly. His gaze shifted to V, and the concern that replaced it was sharp enough to irritate her. Not because it was unwelcome. Because Jackie knew her too well. "What about Jenkins?" Jackie asked. "He give you that much free time tonight?"

John's expression changed immediately. There it was. Concern.

Damn Jackie.

John looked at her with those earnest blue eyes, exhaustion and curiosity cutting through his embarrassment. "Jenkins?"

V shot Jackie a look. *Zip it!*

Jackie saw it. Of course he saw it. His mouth closed, but his face stayed troubled.

V loved Jackie. Truly. He was her best friend, maybe the only real one she had. But sometimes he had all the subtlety of a grenade in a glassware store.

Jenkins was her problem.

Not John's.

John did not need to worry about Arthur Jenkins, Arasaka Counterintel politics, internal promotion struggles, quiet purges, assassinations disguised as career moves, or the fact that V had been spending more and more of her private time planning how to remove her boss before he decided to remove her first.

John did not need to know that she had already started sketching exit routes.

John did not need to know she had considered fake death protocols, identity wipes, shell accounts, dead drops, false travel logs, and how many favors she could burn before Arasaka noticed the smoke.

John did not need to know she sometimes woke up in her apartment with her hand near a gun because she had dreamed Jenkins had finally decided she was more threat than asset.

Not tonight. Tonight, John was going to eat good food, look at her across a table, blush at least six times, and learn that V could be more than a woman in a black suit with blood on her hands.

She smiled. "It's fine," she said.

Jackie's eyes narrowed slightly. He knew she was lying.

John probably did not.

Good. "Work is handled," V continued, smooth and easy. "Jenkins has me on flexible assignment tonight."

Jackie snorted. "Flexible assignment..."

V's smile went tight. "Do you want me to explain my departmental scheduling structure, Jackie?"

"Nope." Jackie raised both hands. "I'm good."

"Thought so."

John still looked concerned, which was sweet and inconvenient. "Are you sure?" he asked.

V softened her expression for him.

"John," she said, "if I could not make time, I would not have asked." That was true enough. She could always make time.

Or steal it.

Or lie to her boss and tell him she was handling one of his assignments. Jenkins loved vague status updates when they made him feel powerful. A few carefully worded messages, a location spoof, and the implication that she was following up on some minor counterintel lead would buy her the evening.

If Jenkins demanded details, she would give him three boring ones and one useful lie. Men like Jenkins never questioned useful lies when they sounded like their own ideas.

Jackie watched her for another second, then glanced at John. His grin came back, softer this time. "All right," he said. "You two have fun."

John opened his mouth.

"As friends," Jackie added before John could say it.

John shut his mouth.

V laughed.

Jackie pointed at both of them. "But you should probably get cleaned up first. You both stink."

John looked mortified all over again.

V looked down at herself, then at John. For one reckless second, V almost asked if he wanted to join her in the shower. The words rose right to the edge of her tongue.

Want to save time?

She could already imagine his face. The blush. The panic. It would have been funny. It also might have broken him. And V did not want to break John. Not unless he asked very nicely.

So she swallowed the line and filed it away for later.

After dinner, maybe. After Carmello's. That was the plan.

Carmello's was high-end without being too cold. Waterfront, expensive, intimate lighting, real food instead of synthetically flavored disappointment, private enough that corpos went there to pretend they were people and mercs only got in if someone richer invited them. The kind of place where Night City looked beautiful because enough money had been spent keeping the ugliness at a flattering distance.

John had probably never eaten somewhere like that in his life.

V wanted to see his reaction. She wanted to watch him try to understand the menu. Wanted to order for him just to make him blush. Wanted to put real wine in his hand and see whether he hated it or pretended to like it.

She wanted a date.

He could call it friends if he needed to.

V knew what she was doing.

"Fine," she said lightly. "I will clean up first."

Jackie's eyes flicked between them. "Separate showers, yeah?"

John made a strangled noise. "Obviously!"

– Lucy –

Lucy Kushinada sighed and sank deeper into the dirty couch.

The couch sighed back.

That was never a good sign.

She shifted slightly, felt something hard and probably not worth investigating dig into her hip, and decided to stop moving. Maine's crew hangout had many qualities. Privacy, sometimes. Weapons, always. Noise, constantly. Clean furniture was not one of them.

Across the room, Maine paced with a hand pressed to his ear, his voice low and irritated as he talked to Faraday.

That was also never a good sign.

Maine did not like Faraday. Nobody liked Faraday. Faraday had the loyalty of a vending machine that charged extra after taking your money. Unfortunately, Faraday also had gigs, and Maine's crew needed gigs. They needed eddies.

Everyone needed eddies.

That was Night City's first law. Before loyalty, before love, before revenge, before dreams. Eddies kept the lights on, bought ammo, paid ripperdocs, bribed cops, replaced broken cyberware, and put food in your mouth that only tasted a little like industrial regret.

So Lucy sat on the dirty couch and waited.

Even though she would rather be somewhere else.

With someone else.

She had told John she was busy tonight.

Technically, that was true. Maine had called everyone in because Faraday had a job, and Lucy was still new enough around the crew that ignoring the call would be noticed. Kiwi had given her that dry, unreadable look that meant showing up was smarter than making people ask where she was. Besides, Lucy needed the money too.

Still. She had wanted to see John.

The thought annoyed her, so she stared harder at Maine.

It did not help.

She could still picture John's face when he blushed. That soft, honest look he got when she leaned too close. The way he had kissed her back in Kabuki, clumsy at first, then eager enough to make something warm curl under her ribs.

She had not expected to like him this much.

That was the problem.

Lucy was very good at not expecting things. Expectations were dangerous. Expectations were how Arasaka got its hooks in people. Expectations were how Night City taught you to look up at the moon and then shot you in the back while you were distracted.

John had slipped through anyway.

Across the room, Rebecca wiggled her eyebrows at her.

Lucy stared back in irritation...

Rebecca grinned.

Lucy narrowed her eyes.

Rebecca wiggled her eyebrows harder.

Lucy's glare became lethal.

Rebecca, naturally, treated that as encouragement.

This was all because of yesterday.

John Welles—sweet, reckless John Welles—had invited Rebecca to a Regina Jones gig. A real gig. A scav den, apparently, because John's idea of easing into edgerunning was walking into a place where people were harvested for parts.

Lucy still did not know whether to be angry, impressed, worried, or all three.

Rebecca had made the emotional calculus much worse by sending Lucy messages the entire time. Teasing ones. Pictures.

Rebecca at the Coyote Bar with John and David Martinez after the gig, grinning like she had just personally discovered violence. John sitting at a table looking tired, handsome, and embarrassed. Rebecca leaning too close to him in one shot, throwing up a peace sign while John looked like he did not know whether he was being adopted or hunted. David holding a plate of food with the hollow-eyed stare of someone who had learned something he could not unlearn.

The captions had been worse:

Your input feeds me after murder dates.

He blushes when I call him cute btw.

Don't worry, new girl, I only borrowed him.

For now :P

Lucy had not replied. Mostly because every reply she thought of sounded too much like a threat.

Rebecca slid off the arm of a chair and sauntered toward her with all the subtlety of a grenade rolling downhill.

Lucy braced herself.

Rebecca plopped down beside her, close enough that their shoulders touched.

Lucy looked at the contact. Then at Rebecca.

Rebecca smiled brightly. "Don't be mad..."

"I'm not mad."

"You're doing the eye thing."

"What eye thing?"

"The thing where you look like you're deciding whether my corpse would fit in the trash can in the corner. For the record, yes it would because I'm fun sized."

Lucy stared at her harder.

Rebecca's grin widened. "See?"

Lucy exhaled through her nose and looked away. "What do you want, Rebecca?"

"First, I was just messing with you yesterday."

Lucy said nothing.

Rebecca bumped her shoulder against Lucy's. "Seriously. Messing with the new girl on the crew. It's basically tradition!"

"I'm not on the crew. Not fully..."

"Eh." Rebecca waved that away. "You're crew-adjacent. Kiwi brings you around. Maine doesn't tell you to leave. Dorio hasn't threatened to break your legs. Pilar still has both hands after talking to you, which means you're basically family."

"Lucky me."

"Right?" Rebecca leaned closer. "Anyway, I did not make a move on your very cute input."

Lucy's jaw tightened.

Rebecca caught it immediately. "Oh, he is cute. Don't give me that look. You know he's cute. Blond, blushy, polite, weirdly brave. Like someone built a corpo-pretty boy and then forgot to install the asshole firmware."

Lucy hated that description because it was accurate. "I'm aware of what he looks like," she said coolly.

"Good. Then you understand how heroic I was being by not making a move."

Lucy turned her head slowly.

Rebecca held up both hands. "I didn't! No matter how much I wanted to." A beat. Then, because Rebecca apparently had no survival instinct around women who carried monowire, she added, "And I really wanted to."

Lucy's fingers twitched. Not enough to deploy the wire. Enough that Rebecca definitely noticed.

Rebecca just laughed. "Relax. I said I didn't."

Lucy sighed. Some of the irritation bled out of her despite herself. Rebecca was annoying. Loud. Crude. Violent. Shameless. But she was also honest in a way Lucy almost respected. Rebecca did not hide the knife. She waved it around, painted it pink, and called it friendship.

"What do you want?" Lucy asked again, less cold this time.

Rebecca settled in more comfortably, pressing side to side with her like personal space was a rumor invented by cowards. "Well," Rebecca said, "I'd like to ask if you want to share John with me."

Lucy went very still.

Rebecca pointed at her immediately. "But! But. I figure we're probably not good enough friends for that yet."

"Y—Yet?"

"Yet," Rebecca repeated, completely unashamed. "So how about we work on that part first?"

Lucy stared at her.

Rebecca smiled like she had proposed something perfectly reasonable instead of attempting to negotiate emotional intimacy through eventual boy-sharing rights.

"You want to become friends," Lucy said slowly, "so you can maybe ask to share John later."

"See? You get me."

"I really don't."

"You will." Rebecca leaned back, hands behind her head. "You seem like a girl who won't scream and run away when I shoot some gonk in the face with a shotgun. That's rare. Most girls get all weird about it."

"Most people get weird about that."

"Most people are boring!"

Lucy's mouth twitched despite herself.

Rebecca saw it and lit up like a muzzle flash. "There it is! I knew you had a sense of humor hiding under all that ice queen attitude!"

Lucy considered violence.

Rebecca continued cheerfully, "Besides, I bet you've sliced some gonk's dick clean off with that scary monowire before."

Lucy froze. It was only for a fraction of a second.

Unfortunately, Rebecca was a predator for reactions. Her eyes widened. "Oh my god."

Lucy looked away.

Rebecca sat up straighter. "You have!?"

"No...."

"You have!"

Lucy felt heat creep up her face, which was humiliating because she had killed people with less embarrassment than this conversation. "It was necessary," she muttered.

Rebecca made a strangled sound of delight.

Lucy glared. "More than once..."

Rebecca's mouth fell open. Then she started cackling.

Dorio glanced over from where she was checking a weapon at the table. Pilar lifted his head with immediate interest, which was never good. Kiwi, seated near a terminal with one leg crossed over the other, did not look up, but Lucy saw the faintest movement at the corner of her mask-covered mouth.

Traitor.

Rebecca slapped her own knee. "I knew it! I fucking knew it. You don't get monowire and that whole mysterious murder ballerina thing going without taking some creative liberties."

Lucy covered her face with one hand. "I hate this crew."

Rebecca scooted even closer, now looking very delighted. "Okay, we are absolutely becoming friends."

"I have not agreed to that." Lucy lowered her hand and gave Rebecca the flattest look she could manage.

Rebecca opened her mouth, clearly ready to say something even worse.

Maine's voice cut through the room. "Ok, everyone. We got a gig."

The change was immediate.

Rebecca's grin did not vanish, but it turned more menacing. Dorio straightened. Pilar stopped lounging like a bored idiot and looked interested. Falco lifted his head from the van parts he had been pretending to organize. Kiwi finally turned away from her terminal.

Lucy's embarrassment disappeared under professional focus.

Maine ended the call and stood near the center of the room, arms crossed, jaw tight. That meant the job was either bad, profitable, or both.

Dorio was the first to speak. "Details?"

Pilar leaned forward. "Better have good pay. Last one barely covered ammo and my emotional suffering."

Rebecca snorted. "Your emotional suffering is worth half a vending machine burrito at best."

"Oh come on. It's worth at least a premium burrito from an actual food cart!"

"Maine," Dorio said, cutting through them before Rebecca and Pilar could spiral into another sibling argument that ended with gunfire or property damage.

Maine nodded. "Last minute job. Surveillance and tail. Simple on paper."

"On paper...?" Kiwi asked.

Maine looked at her. "And it's got some high pay."

That got everyone's attention.

Even Lucy sat a little straighter.

High pay and last minute meant trouble. High pay meant urgency, risk, secrecy, or a client with more money than patience. Last minute meant the fixer either trusted them enough to move quickly or had scraped them from the bottom of the list because everyone smarter had refused.

With Faraday, it was usually safer to assume the second.

Pilar grinned. "Now we're talking."

Dorio frowned. "Who's the client?"

Maine's expression darkened slightly. "Corpo..."

Rebecca groaned. "Boo!"

“A high ranking Corpo,” Maine added.

Kiwi’s fingers tapped once against her knee. “Which corp?”

Maine paused.

Lucy felt the room tighten.

“Arasaka.”

No one spoke for a second. Arasaka was not just a corp. Not to Lucy. Not ever. The name landed under her skin like cold wire. Her spine went still. Her breathing stayed even because she forced it to. Her face did not move because she had spent too much of her life learning how not to react to that word.

Arasaka.

Raised her. Trained her. Used her. Hunted her.

Even now, years later, part of her body still expected a door to open and black-clad agents to walk in with orders to drag her back.

Rebecca glanced at her.

So did Kiwi.

Lucy hated that they noticed.

Maine continued, either not seeing or choosing not to address it. “Faraday says better not to ask too many questions. The client thinks one of his subordinates is planning to **betray** him soon. Wants us to tail her, watch her, gather proof if we can.”

Dorio’s frown deepened. “Corporate internal politics?”

Maine grumbled. “Sounds like it.”

“Ugh! Those jobs get messy.” she whined.

“Most jobs get messy,” Dorio pointed out.

“Corpo messy is different...” Kiwi said softly from her side of the room. She spoke from decades of experience no one else had but her.

Gangs killed you because you crossed them. Scavs killed you because you had chrome. Cops killed you because paperwork was easier if you stopped moving. Corpors killed you because someone in a room three districts away wanted a cleaner quarterly report.

Lucy’s eyes narrowed. “Who’s the target?” she asked.

Maine looked at her for a second then he flicked the job packet to the crew network.

Data appeared in Lucy's optics.

Partial profile: Female. Arasaka Counterintel. Name withheld in the first summary layer, probably because Faraday was being Faraday and liked pretending information was a treat to be earned.

Current location estimate attached.

Maine spoke aloud as everyone read. "We have her location tonight. She has a reservation at some snooty high-end restaurant called Carmello's..."

XXX